

Sierra was a movie star, James a writer,
and everything conspired to keep them apart
until their guardian angels stepped in.

REMEMBER TODAY



By Elswyth Thane

Remember Today

For her twelfth birthday Sierra Nevada Thompson received an unusual gift. She fell in love.

Sierra, spontaneously gay and generous, a ranch-bred tom-boy who feared nothing, and James Montgomery, a shy, lonely boy from the East, were an odd pair, and yet the love they felt for each other on the first meeting was inevitable and persistent.

"But what happens to us, Jamie?" Sierra demanded at their parting, so soon after they found each other. "Suppose I never see you again!" And he replied urgently, "Remember today. Promise that no matter what happens while I'm gone, or how long it is, you will always remember today."

Sierra remembered. Time after time in the years that followed, circumstances conspired to separate them. When Sierra attained fame as a rodeo singer, she remembered, and when she signed a film contract, the opportunity for which a thousand girls would give their immortal souls was for her just something extra to lay at Jamie's feet.

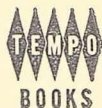
Yet even with the help of their guardian angels, the course of their love was far from smooth. Jamie had his own work and his pride; Sierra had her great success. The years and miles took them farther apart, other people came between them, but each time they met their first love, never gone, surged forth to overwhelm them. Still, James and Sierra made things awfully difficult for themselves, and those guardian angels of theirs had to labor heroically before the lives of their spirited charges could be brought into line.

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Remember Today

LEAVES FROM A GUARDIAN ANGEL'S
NOTEBOOK

ELSWYTH THANE



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Remember Today

(The idea of a guardian angel, assigned to preside over each human life from birth to death, is older than the idea of a Saviour. Members of a host "infinitely numerous," ageless themselves, full of wisdom, yet far short of divine omniscience, they are presumed to keep their appointed vigil, and "into our thoughts, into our prayers, with gentle helpings glide."

The following intimate record by one who, though we are introduced to several colleagues, remains nameless, must not be confused with the "dreadful day-book" of his senior, the Recording Angel, but is rather in the nature of source-material for the great and final Reckoning.—Ed.)

	NO. <u>747</u>
NAME	<u>Sierra Thompson</u>
BORN	<u>Bar K Ranch, near Reno, Nevada, U.S.A.</u> <u>June 18, 1911</u>
SEX	<u>Female</u>
PARENTS	<u>Big John Thompson, owner of the Bar K Ranch.</u> <u>Donna Lambert of Salt Lake City, Utah who</u> <u>forsook the Mormon faith at the time of</u> <u>her marriage.</u>
REMARKS	<u>Enough money. Enough love. I'm going</u> <u>to like this job.</u>

A lusty, vital babe with a strong hold on life. I doubt if I'm going to be bored with her. The father's Angel admits that one grows very attached to this family. The mother's Angel says sentimentally that it's a sweet task.

Well, I can do with a restful assignment after that nasty business in the Balkans I've just finished with. I never seem to get used to having my people shot out from under me, as it were. Makes one feel so futile. Of course I did save him from it four times, but he would have it that way in the end. There is a limit to what one can do for them. There oughtn't to be, but there is. Especially if they won't trouble to heed their hunches. There ought to be some better way to guide them, too, I've always said so, but nobody Up There takes any notice. Sometimes I think God is getting old, but of course that can't be. Even in His younger days, some people always contrived to infringe their Charts and try to do things their own way, and came to grief as they need never have done. If Caesar had been more easily satisfied, I could have seen him through. Of course when you get a Chart like Marie Antoinette's there isn't much you can do except give them courage. . . .

Here I go worrying over my failures again, at the start of a new job. This one is going to be all right. This one will listen to me. This one will be easy. I hope.

She was born at high noon, in the big front bedroom of the ranch house. The doctor from Reno arrived barely ten minutes ahead of her. He'd never

have made it without one of those motor cars. She is the first child, late, and much desired. Perhaps some slight disappointment that she is not a boy, but that will pass and they will cherish her all the more as time goes on—she will be the only child. The father says she yells like a boy, and seems to feel that's something in her favor.

I've never worked in this part of the world before, except for that baby up in Saskatchewan, and it didn't last long enough for me to get a good look round. These ranch houses appear to be really very comfortable. Amazing to think what a short time ago the whole place was a wilderness. Let me see, when I was at Versailles I don't suppose there was a white man for hundreds of miles round here. And now look. Motor cars and bathrooms.

* * *

(The details of weaning and teething and learning to walk and talk are all pretty much the same, and we can skip a few pages here. Sierra gave her Angel no real workout until she was twelve years old.—Ed.)

* * *

June 18, 1923.—All right, here we go. I thought it was about time. Things have been remarkably quiet, considering the dynamite my Sierra is stuffed with. Now we're off.

She's had an odd sort of birthday gift for turning twelve years old. She's fallen in love. His name is James Montgomery, and he's come from New York with his mother to stay at Bar X while she gets a

Reno divorce. He's younger than Sierra by one month, which he will find embarrassing now, and more so before he's through. His Angel turns out to be Asmilius, who was on a job with me about a hundred years ago in Vienna. Nice to meet up again in pleasanter circumstances.

Asmilius says the boy is on the right track, and it looks as though we'd be seeing a good deal of each other from now on. Oh, yes, the thing is mutual. I'm always a little sorry when it takes them young like this. Grown-ups are so insensitive. They don't realize that if a Destiny is very strongly marked, as Sierra's is, it can lay hold at a very early age. Neither of these children is a drifter. Both must hew a way, however difficult the going may be, towards the things they want. James and Sierra will want each other, from this day forward. Asmilius says we will have trouble with Mrs. Montgomery. I can well believe it. One has only to look at the color of her hair.

James and Sierra are an odd pair, but that's the way it often is when you get something really big to deal with. Their first meeting today was enough to show me what we're in for, even without what the Chart says.

Sierra is strong and well-grown for her age, and a thorough tomboy. They keep her hair cut shoulder length, and it's curly and bleached nearly white by the sun. Her blue eyes seem very large and cool and her teeth very white in her tanned face. She has a most engaging grin. She wears blue denim overalls and a blue shirt, like a lad. No one has ever frightened her or humiliated her, so that she has no shyness or self-

consciousness. What discipline was necessary has always been the same sort of quick, hard schooling her father gives his horses. She obeys like a well-broken pony, and with as little rancor. She is unmischievous, generous, and spontaneously gay.

Her birthday gift from her father was a new saddle for her pinto horse, which she calls David, no one knows why. It's an unusual name for a horse in these parts. Right after breakfast she put the new saddle on David down at the corral and swung herself up to try it. "It's got a *beautiful* squeak!" she said to her father in passionate gratitude, and leaned down to give him a strangling hug.

He stood looking up at her with the sun squinting his eyes. Behind them in the yard a semi-circle of half a dozen cowboys was closing in diffidently, each with his birthday offering in his hands—a braided quirt, a pair of fringed gauntlets, a real snakeskin hat-band with yellow glass eyes, a bright blue neckerchief, etc. They haven't much money to spend, but none of them overlooked the day.

"Don't go far without your hat," her father said, squinting up at her, and then with a quick, protective sort of gesture—caresses are rare in this country—he set his own big stetson on her sun-bleached curls. "And wait for the boys now—they've brought their things."

So there she sat, like a princess on a throne, wearing her father's hat, while the ranch hands shuffled up one by one with their arduously chosen gifts. She can't go wrong at times like this. Her tact and charm would do Royalty proud. She hung the quirt on the pommel, she

fastened the hat-band in place on top of the one which already adorned Big John's hat, she pulled on the gauntlets to prove them a perfect fit, and tied the blue neckerchief round her throat—and each man as he made way for the next one felt amply rewarded by her unfeigned surprise and pleasure that he had known so well what she liked best for presents.

Just as the little ceremony ended, the Ford car rattled through the gate and into the yard and came to a halt at the side door of the house.

"Oh, glory, I forgot!" said Big John. "The new people come today."

They take paying guests now at the ranch house. People from the East, who are here for divorces or to convalesce from some illness. It's beginning to be the fashion for women getting divorces to live at a ranch outside Reno and learn to ride and so on—a lot of and-so-on—while they're waiting. They pester the life out of the cowboys, and the horses suffer too, but there's a profit in it for the local people, and times aren't too good. A little extra money comes in handy these days, even at Bar X.

James Montgomery and his mother got out of the back seat of the Ford, and Sierra's father walked across the yard to meet them, followed by the pinto horse with Sierra on its back. It's a hot, dusty ride out from Reno, and James was not dressed for it. He was wearing a blue serge knickerbocker suit and cap, and black shoes and stockings, and he was very hot and mussy. He is at the skinny stage, with a neck like a baby bird's. He stood there, half blind in the blazing sun,

and stared up at Sierra as the horse David carried her towards him. His expression was a mixture of incredulity and a holy sort of joy.

And Sierra? She never saw the gray dust on his suit and shoes, nor his pipe-stem legs and loose collar. All she saw was his eyes, dark blue, fringed with black lashes, looking up at her.

Their elders were shaking hands and saying all the usual things. Donna Thompson had come out of the side door, and the mail-bag and luggage were being removed from the Ford by a couple of the hands.

James's dusty black shoes took a step forward, and then four or five more, which brought him level with David's nose and the horse nuzzled him inquiringly. James laid one hand on the bridle where it joined the bit, and patted David's cheek with the other—the gesture of one not unaccustomed to horses—but his eyes never left Sierra's face. David was satisfied, and blew down James's neck.

“And is this your daughter, Mr. Thompson? How nice, they must be almost of an age. This is James, my dear, what is your name?”

Sierra shifted her gaze politely to Mrs. Montgomery's pretty face framed in rather frizzy blonde hair under a pink hat.

“My name is Sierra,” she said quietly.

“That's a very pretty name. Say How-do-you-do to Sara, James. Where are your manners?” The ungentle little push she gave him sent him forward to Sierra's stirrup, and he raised one hand to fumble off his cap.

"How do you do?" he said politely, like a sleep-walker.

And Sierra, perhaps from awe of the thing which was happening to her, groped for and removed her father's stetson from her pale curls.

"How do you do?" she replied gravely, bareheaded in the sun.

"Now, don't be shy of each other, for goodness' sake!" admonished Mrs. Montgomery, and turned to Sierra's mother, who stood waiting to show her the way to her rooms inside the house. "Children are so funny, aren't they! James doesn't make friends easily, but I'm sure your girl will be good for him. James, ask Sara if she'll let you ride her pony sometimes, it will be much nicer here than bouncing round the Park each morning, won't it!"

Almost before she had finished speaking, Sierra had slid from the saddle to the ground.

"Yes, of course you can ride him," she said, and passed the bridle to James with a look which endowed him with all she possessed. "Any time you like."

"Well, if the boy knows how to ride he can have his pick of half a dozen horses down in the corral," said Big John easily. "Take him right down there now, Sierra, and let him look them over." He picked up Mrs. Montgomery's alligator-leather dressing-case with a decisive movement which released the children from her attention. "I expect you'd like to see your rooms, ma'am."

"We'll go in this way, I think," said his wife, opening the side door.

Sierra's voice stopped him as he followed the two women across the threshold.

"Dad. Can he have Monte to ride?"

"Monte!" His wide grin broke across his brown face.

"Oh, sure, the best is none too good, I can see that!"

The screen door banged behind him.

"I suppose Monte bucks, or something," said James warily, handing back David's bridle.

"Oh, no!" she cried as though he had made an excellent joke. "I wouldn't put you on a horse that hadn't been gentled! Monte has the best manners next to David. And you could train him some more, until he's every bit as good. Would you like to come and see him now?"

They moved across the yard together, already in step, David's bridle over her arm and his soft nose at her shoulder. The stetson hat when she replaced it made her taller than James in his blue serge cap.

"It's nice you can ride," she said admiringly. "Most Easterners can't."

"I'll probably fall off, just to show you," said James.

"That's a funny sort of saddle you've got. I'm not used to anything so elaborate as that."

"It's new. It's a birthday present."

"Is that so? When's your birthday?"

"Today. I'm twelve."

"So am I. That is—I will be next month."

"Then I'm a whole month older than you are!" she discovered with surprise.

"I can't help that," he muttered defensively.

Sierra thought this extremely witty of him, and showered him with laughter, to his amazement.

"No, I guess it's sure too late now!" she agreed cheerfully, and he stole a glance of abject gratitude at her profile as they reached the corral gate. She didn't mind his being a whole month younger and unused to cow-pony saddles. She didn't give herself airs because she was already twelve and could ride, he'd bet, like Tom Mix. She laughed, but not *at* him. She was lending him the next best horse to her own on the whole place. Maybe she liked him. The corral bars opened before him like the gates of heaven.

"That's Monte," she was saying, "over there in the corner, with the white star." She dropped David's reins over his head and left him standing, caught up a halter from the top rail, and approached the sleek little bay confidently. "Come on, you Monte horse, we've got company."

Monte made a perfunctory show of reluctance and then allowed himself to be caught and led over to where James stood watching.

"This is James," she said. "He's your new boss. Say Howdy, Monte."

Monte lifted his off fore. He looked a little ashamed of himself, but he did it. James accepted it politely and put it back.

"Did you teach him that?"

She nodded.

"Dad says I've no call to turn the place into a circus, teaching them tricks and all, but I think they ought to

know common manners. He'll say Thank-you for a lump of sugar too, won't you, Monte?"

Monte whickered obligingly, even without the sugar.

"He's wonderful," said James, much impressed. "I bet he knows more than I do."

Again her laughter sparkled round him.

"Reckon he's still got to learn how to say funny things the way you do!"

"That wasn't—very funny," James pointed out honestly.

"Maybe not, but it's better than he can do!" said Sierra. "Would you like to go for a ride before lunch, or not till after? I bet you're hungry as a wolf right now. Shall we go up to the cook-house and get something?"

"Well, I—" Now that she mentioned it, he *was* hungry, after a hurried dining-car breakfast. "I expect I'd better go change my clothes anyway, before we ride."

For the first time she noticed that he had clothes—dusty, stifling, city clothes which must be very uncomfortable.

"Maybe you had better change, it's so hot. Have you got some overalls in your suitcase?"

"Well, no—not exactly. I've got what I wear at the riding-school back home."

She released Monte from the halter and turned him back into the corral with a slap, and began to pull off the new fringed gauntlets.

"I'll take the saddle off David and we'll go up to the house," she said. "We can ride later when the sun's gone over. On the way in we'll ask Wong for some

cookies and milk. I got up so early this morning I'm starving."

One of the gauntlets fell to the ground and they both stooped for it. James touched it first and handed it back to her, as though returning a Castilian beauty's fan. Nobody had ever picked up anything for her before. It was she who did the stooping at Bar X. For a moment, while their eyes held, he was below her, his face foreshortened, looking up.

"Thank you," she said, conscious of the new dignity he had conferred upon her.

He watched her tug loose the girth and shoulder the staggering weight of the saddle.

"Can't I—" he began, reaching out with futile hands as she passed him and landed the saddle expertly on the corral rail.

"It's sure heavier than my old one!" she admitted, and paused to run a caressing hand along the shining, patterned leather. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"If only I'd known it was your birthday today I'd have brought you something," he said unhappily.

"How could you know?" she inquired with serene logic. "Besides, you came today, didn't you? And that was the best present of all."

He stared.

"You mean—me? You mean—you're glad I came?"

"My goodness, you act as though nobody's ever been glad to see you before!"

"I guess they haven't. I guess—well, not to mention, anyway. Look—let this be my present to you—" He began to fumble at the leather strap of the watch on

his wrist. "My uncle gave it to me, it—it wasn't new then, but it keeps good time, all the same—that is, it gains about seven minutes each day, you have to remember to set it back at night when you wind it—some day I'll get you a better one—"

He was holding it out to her. She saw past it to the hand that held it—a whiter, thinner, longer-fingered hand than her own. And while she looked her eyes filled with tears, and they were tears of rage because his uncle hadn't given him a new watch, a perfect watch that didn't gain, a watch that was good enough for him, so that he needn't apologize for it to anybody—

"D-don't you want it?" The thin hand wavered away from her disappointedly, and she caught it in both her brown ones.

"Oh, I do! I want it more than anything in the world!"

"Well, then, take it! Here, let me—"

"No, I can't possibly. Dad says I can't have a watch till I'm eighteen."

"Why can't you?"

"I don't know, he just said so. He's promised me one then."

"Well, he wouldn't mind if you just wore mine, would he? I mean, it would be yours, really, only he could think I just loaned it to you— What are you crying for? Yes, you are, there are tears in your eyes! I bet if he knew you wanted one as much as that he'd get you one sooner. Here, let me fasten it on, hold still,

now—" He surveyed it proudly, strapped round her brown wrist. "There. Looks nice, doesn't it!"

"It's beautiful."

"Well, then, stop crying! It's yours, now—only nobody needs to know that it is, except us. Look, Sara, please stop crying—"

She raised swimming eyes to him in protest.

"Not Sara. Sierra."

"*Sierra!* Like the *mountains?*"

She nodded.

"That's wonderful." He thought it over for a minute. "Wonderful." A diffident smile spread slowly across his face. "Sierra Nevada?" he queried softly. "Or Sierra Leone?"

"*Sierra Thompson!*"

They laughed together, at his peerless wit.

Well, well, sighed Asmilius, as we watched them cross the yard together towards the cook-house door—
Well, well, here we go again!

They ate the cookies and milk on the front veranda, and then reviewed Sierra's other presents which were piled on a folding table by a window in the ranch house parlor.

A concertina from her mother rated next to the saddle—she had learned to play one belonging to one of the boys at the bunk-house, but this was her very own, with red bellows and silver-plated keys. A big box of chocolates, tied with a wide blue ribbon—a framed Remington print of The Water-Hole—a pair of beaded

moccasins—an Indian charm on a dirty piece of buckskin—a handful of trinkets from a souvenir shop in Reno . . .

James, however, perceived a lack. There weren't any books. It didn't seem possible.

"You've certainly got a lot of very interesting things," he said thoughtfully. "I don't think I ever saw so many different kinds of presents."

"What kind of presents do you get on your birthdays?" she inquired at once.

"Well, I—mostly I get books."

"Books?" Her eyes were round with surprise.

"Yes, you see I—well, I wouldn't know how to get along without books, I guess."

"School books?"

"No, just—books. You see, before my birthday and at Christmas time I just make out a list of the ones I want and then the family sort of chips in and gets me some of them."

"But what kind of books are they?" she persisted curiously.

"No special kind. 'Robinson Crusoe' and—'The Jungle Books' and Bret Harte—Sir Walter Scott—Mark Twain—"

"Have you read all those?"

"Well—haven't you?"

"No. But I *will!*" she added hastily, sensitive to his surprise. "You write down the names for me, and I will!"

"No reason why you should, I guess," he assured her, trying to hide the shock of discovering that this

superb creature was illiterate. "I just—don't have much else to do, that's all. I read because I—because it's something you can do in an apartment in New York. Living out here, of course, it's different."

"Oh, but I *can* read!" she assured him eagerly. "I go to school every winter in Reno and I have to read then. I guess it doesn't stay with me very well at school, but it would be different with the books you read. I've got a book upstairs. It's called 'The Night Before Christmas.' I've had it ever since I was six. Oh, James, don't look like that, *please* don't—"

"Like what?"

"Well, as though I was no better than a heathen—"

"But I never—"

"Next time the Ford goes into Reno I'll send for some books, honest I will, and then you won't think I'm such a dunce! Only you'll have to tell me what to ask for, just till I get used to it!"

"I've got a couple upstairs in my bag you might like."

"Have you? Will you lend them to me? Can I see them now?"

Together they climbed the stairs to his room, where his suitcase had been placed unopened on his bed. Sierra stood watching while he unlatched it and fished out two or three well-worn volumes and a couple of new ones.

"Which one can I have?"

"Any one you want. All of 'em."

"I guess you must think I'm pretty ignorant, not having any books of my own."

"Oh, no," he protested anxiously, horrified at her humility. "I just happen to have quite a lot, but—I guess books are pretty much over-rated—that is, I mean, everybody doesn't have to feel the way I do about them—I mean, lots of people don't—I mean—"

"Well, it would be pretty awful, wouldn't it, if half the time I didn't know what you were talking about, just because I'm so ignorant!"

"Sierra, *don't* say that!" he entreated in an agony of embarrassment. "You're not ignorant, it's just that I—well, you've had David to ride, and—and you had to learn to play the concertina, and—"

"I'll read all these in no time, and then you won't have to feel ashamed of me—"

"But I'm *not* ashamed of you, that's the craziest thing I ever heard of, how could I be—"

"Would this be a good one to start on?" she asked, selecting it at random.

"Yes, you'd like that, it's—" He realized distractedly that he was going to say "easy." "—it's one of my favorites. You'll like that one."

She looked up at him gravely, the book between her strong brown hands.

"I'll like whatever you do," she promised.

Not even bedazzled Sierra could overlook James's costume when he appeared in the parlor doorway after lunch dressed for riding. His whipcord breeches flared fantastically at the hips and gripped his thin knees above where his polished leather riding-boots began. His pale tan poplin shirt was fastened at the neck by a neat green four-in-hand which a miniature riding-

crop pin held in place. His gloves were unbuttoned and turned back at the wrists. He carried a slim, flexible leather crop.

"My glory, look what's here!" cried Big John tactlessly.

"Doesn't he look cute in those clothes?" Mrs. Montgomery always spoke in the presence of children as though they could not hear. "They're made by a famous men's tailor on Fifth Avenue."

"He'll die of the heat in that outfit here," said Donna Thompson quietly. "Sierra, take him upstairs and give him a pair of your overalls and a cotton shirt. Your things will fit him all right, and he'll be much more comfortable."

"Oh, but it's what he always wears in the Park, isn't it, darling, and he never minds the heat at all!" argued his mother.

"It's hotter here," said Donna serenely. "Go along, Sierra, and do as I say. He'll have to wear his own shoes, your moccasins will be too small. We'll get him some Western clothes in Reno tomorrow."

"You see, Mrs. Montgomery, those things he's got on must kind of choke him at the knees," Sierra explained kindly. "Out here we wear overalls so the air can get up inside. And it isn't as though you were wearing girl's clothes," she added to James as he followed her meekly up the stairs, "because the fact is, it's me that wears boy's clothes!"

"I expect Monte would have got the fright of his life if I'd come at him dressed like this," reflected James, accepting the folded blue garments she handed

she took him from her bureau drawer. "It sure wouldn't do to start off wrong with him, I want him to like me."

"He will!" she assured him devoutly. "I'll go on down to the corral, and you come when you're ready."

James arrived at the corral to find Monte already decked out in the new saddle, and one of the hands called Joe was tightening the girth of the old one on David. James, unaccustomed to his role of visiting Royalty, was inclined to argue this arrangement with the Sierra.

"You oughtn't to do that, how do you think that makes me feel?" he complained. "I bet you haven't even had a ride on it yet yourself."

"Oh, yes, I tried it out this morning—before you came," she reminded him carelessly. "It looks right nice on Monte, doesn't it!"

"It's beautiful. But it makes me feel sort of queer, taking your spare clothes and now your new saddle—I don't think I can live up to all this. And those stirrups, you know—I don't know exactly what to do about stirrups like that."

"What kind of stirrups are you used to?"

"Well—smaller ones," he explained vaguely. "You see, at the riding-school we have to sort of sit with our knees up to our chins."

"You'll find these yere a lot easier than that fancy jockey stuff they have down East," said the hand Joe, straightening from David's girth. "Try 'em—see how good they feel." He gave James a boost up.

"I see," said James, adjusting himself with satisfaction to the roomy saddle. "Yes, it sure feels—different."

He fingered the high, decorated pommel dubiously. "What's this for? To hold on to?"

"You hang your rope on that," grinned Joe.

"Is that so," said James imperturbably, and both Joe and Sierra regarded him with affection as Sierra was swung up.

"Let James borrow your hat, Joe," she said. "He's not used to this sun."

"Oh, sure, anything you say," Joe agreed and clapped his big stetson on James's head. "Sun's gone over now, though."

"Thank you," said James, settling the hat at a chic angle. "Well, here we go," he said. "I hope Monte won't die laughing before we get back."

They rode out together across the lengthening shadows of the yard. The hand called Pop, who had taught Sierra to play his concertina, ambled up to join Joe at the corral rail.

"Cute, ain't they," he said sentimentally.

"She give him her new saddle."

"*What-at?*"

"Yep. Monte, and her new saddle, and my hat. Looks like he's the Prince of Wales or somepun!"

Under Donna's supervision, James was outfitted for ranch life at a store in Reno the next day.

It takes three months to get a divorce the Reno way. And three months when you're twelve might as well be forever. You don't have to worry about tomorrow, you don't look ahead, you send down roots, you for-

get to keep track of days, you don't even think of time, because three whole months will never really end. . . .

* * *

September 15, 1923.—James realized it first, from something his mother said. Stunned, he went to consult the calendar in the cook-house. It was true. For two more days he dwelt with it alone. This afternoon he decided she'd have to know.

They rode out for a picnic to where a big cottonwood leaned above the bank of the river. Sierra took her concertina, and James took a book. They ate their lunch on the shady grass, out of a cardboard shoe-box, while the ponies grazed near by, their bridles trailing.

He hated to tell her. To James, who had found life rather a problem so far, Sierra's lightheartedness was a revelation. It roused in him a deep protectiveness. He would go to any lengths to cherish that gaiety of spirit which seemed to him so defenseless a thing in a world where so many chill winds blow. Even now, after all these weeks, he could still marvel at her readiness for laughter. He was still surprised at how well his small jokes went in her company, the somewhat slanting humor which was to him more a habit of mind than an attempt to be funny.

In James's life people were likely to say things they didn't mean, or they spoke sharply to a person who had had nothing to do with the cause of their irritability, or they blamed you for things that weren't your fault, or promised things that never came off, and sometimes even told you things that weren't true. You

had to be careful. You had to expect the worst. You didn't dare count on things. You had to be ready for whatever came, and you never knew what direction it was coming from. And no matter how you felt about anything, you must never let anybody know. You lived *en garde*.

It had not taken him long to perceive that Sierra had not encountered the same sort of thing at all. Sierra drew back at first from his mother's fondling hand on her hair—shied like a restless pony—yet Sierra had been wrapped round all her life with a wordless tenderness that left her entirely unprepared for the kind of spiritual buffetings James was accustomed to. He worried about her endlessly, out of his own chastening experience. What would happen to her, he wondered, if ever she left the ranch, and the world as he knew it got at her? And if he was not there at the time, who would teach her the sorry art of self-defense as evolved by himself?

Her inborn happiness, the way she cast herself trustfully into each new day, heedless and headlong and unsuspecting, was exquisite to see, for James. Gradually her happiness became a fragile bubble that he carried himself in his own two hands, with an agony of care and devotion. And today he had to tell her, somehow, that their time was up.

For a while he read to her, out of "Swiss Family Robinson." And then, because he said it made him sleepy to read after lunch, she played "Oh! Susanna!" on the concertina and sang it.

"I soon will be in New Orleans,
And then I'll look aroun-nd,
And when I find Susanna
I'll fall upon the ground.

"Oh! Susanna!
Don't you cry for me!
I'se come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee.

"But if I do not find her
This darkie sure will die,
And when I'm dead and buried,
Susanna, don't you cry

"Oh! Susanna!
Don't you cry for me!—"

Her voice was another miracle to James—clear and true, like a wild bird's, with surprising deep tones. She sang the way a bird does, without airs or inhibitions, for her own amusement, and out of her own joy of life. And James, who at first found it so sweet and so intimate a thing he felt almost embarrassed to listen, had come to count it as much a part of his day as his breakfast.

He lay on his back in the deep grass, not looking at her, and his throat ached unbearably. There was a long silence when she finished—so long that she bent to look into his face, and found his eyes wide open and very blue.

"I thought you'd dropped off for sure," she said, and the concertina moved again, quietly, between her hands.

"No. I wasn't asleep. I heard every word."

"Dad dozes off when I sing," she remarked cheerfully, above the purring instrument. "I don't take offense."

"Play 'Tell me the tales that to me were so dear,'" he demanded suddenly without moving. "Play 'Long, Long Ago'—will you?"

"Sure," said Sierra, while the concertina changed key, between her hands. "Anything you say—"

And when she had finished all three verses—

"That's a nice song," he said. "I don't know but what I like that best of all the songs you sing."

"Better than 'Susanna'?"

"Um-hm."

"Better than 'When the Work's All Done This Fall'?"

"Yep."

"It's the song my mother always used to sing me to sleep with when I was little," she told him, playing chords softly.

"I still think it's a nice song," he murmured, unsmiling.

"Jamie, what's the matter with you today? Don't you feel well?"

"What was that you said?"

"I said, are you sick?"

"What was that you called me?"

"Oh, well, I'm sorry it slipped out, it was just—sometimes I call you Jamie when you aren't there."

For the space of a minute he digested the fact that she called him anything at all when he wasn't there.

"I guess you think I'm pretty fresh," she mumbled, into the crooning concertina.

"No, I—I kind of like it."

"Honest?"

"Um-hm."

"Are you sure you feel all right?"

"Yeh, I'm all right, I guess."

"Then read me another chapter."

"It's not much use. We won't have time to finish the book," he said, nerving himself to it.

"Won't have time—?" she repeated blankly.

"I'll leave it here with you. I know how it ends."

"Leave—are you going away?"

"She gets the divorce tomorrow," he told her, as gently as he could.

"*Already?*" She sounded incredulous.

"It's been three months. That's all it takes to get a divorce out here."

"But I never thought— But where are you *going?*"

"Back to New York, I guess. And then—well, if she marries the Englishman, and I'm pretty sure she will, I'll have to go to Eton. That's a school in England."

"*England!*"

"Sounds a long way off, doesn't it."

"But, Jamie, you *can't!* How long have you known about this? Why did you just have to go and spring

it on me this way, without any warning? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"You were happy," he tried to explain, acutely aware again of the precious bubble he guarded so jealously from harm; putting off the moment when he must look at her and see her troubled and unhappy—because of him. "I couldn't just—well, no use in crossing bridges till we come to 'em, is there."

"But—don't you *mind*?" she cried, fumbling at his reticence, vexed that he seemed to take it so philosophically when she felt so aghast, with their world in ruins around her.

"Of course I mind," he told her patiently. "I used to think it might be fun—sailing on a big ship, and all that. But now—well, now I know it isn't going to be much fun unless you could come too."

"Mom wouldn't let me," she objected, ready to entertain the idea herself.

"I know she wouldn't. Besides, they don't take girls at Eton."

"B-but what happens to us, Jamie?" she demanded in bewilderment. "Suppose I never see you again!"

"You'll see me again, all right. Maybe not for a long time, but—as soon as I finish school over there and can earn some money I'll come back."

"But that will be *years*!" she wailed rebelliously.

"Looks that way, doesn't it."

"But we've got to *do* something! We can't just sit here and let it happen! Jamie, look at me, what are we going to do?"

But he lay still where he was, his eyes on the branches of the cottonwood tree overhead.

"We can't do anything," he said flatly, because his throat was aching.

"But *think*, Jamie, we must do something!" And then, with feminine perversity—"If you *really* didn't want to go, you'd think of something!"

There was the making of a fine quarrel there, if he had chosen to take it up with her, but he knew she was beside herself, like a half-broken pony kicking out when the girth tightens horrifyingly round its middle. He shook his head, full of pity for her because so far she had had so little of this kind of thing to bear, and hence had so much to learn.

"If I made a fuss about leaving here she'd know it was because of you," he said, "and she'd think that was funny."

"*Funny!*"

"Oh, well, you know how it is," he said wearily.

But Sierra, whose mother never laughed at her, didn't quite understand. He was right, though, to keep his love for Sierra from his mother's knowledge as far as he could. She would only exploit it as another evidence of how quaint children are. She would tease him about it before people. Worse, she would pretend to sympathize.

"But what becomes of me?" moaned Sierra. "I can't bear not to see you for years!"

"I'll come back as soon as I can," he promised patiently, for the more she strove against unalterable facts

the more it seemed as though something was tearing him to pieces inside.

"Do you *have* to go to England with her? Can't you stay with your father?"

"She says not. The fact is, my father drinks too much. That's mainly why she's getting the divorce. That and the Englishman she wants to marry."

"Is he nice?"

"Yes, he's all right, I guess."

"Wouldn't he help us?"

"I don't see how. He's offered to put me through a good school—the best in England, he says. After that I can earn my own living and do as I please. That's what I have to concentrate on now. How to get enough money of my own so I can come back." He turned over suddenly on to his front, and his outflung hand found and gripped her moccasined foot in the deep grass between them. "Sierra. Will you promise me something?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Cross your heart?"

"Cross my heart!"

"Remember today," he said urgently, looking up at her. "Promise that no matter what happens while I'm gone, or how long it is, you will always remember today."

"I will, Jamie, I promise!"

For a long moment then their eyes held gravely, fathoming mystery, fearlessly at gaze with something neither of them quite understood but both knew to be desperately real and essential and desirable.

At last he let go her foot and lay back in the grass again, looking up into the branches overhead.

"Till there can be another one like it," he said, "when I get back from England."

Her breath caught on a sob, and he winced as though pain had run through him.

"Don't cry, Sierra—I don't think I can stand it if you cry."

Sierra wrenched off her tears with a superhuman effort, and brushed the back of her hand across her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Jamie," she apologized. "I'm not a cry-baby, honest, only—"

"I know you're not," he said gently. "It's easier for me if you don't cry—that's all."

"Then I won't."

Silence closed in round them, till the river was audible against its bank, and small sounds the grazing horses made, and somewhere in the distance the persistent bawling of a steer who had a grievance.

"I'll write to you," he said quite steadily, seeking out of that deep protective instinct to find some comfort he might offer even in the midst of desolation. "Boats go back and forth every week, you know. I'll send you picture postcards of castles and things. And you write and tell me all the news about David and Monte and the boys—will you?"

"Yes, Jamie. And you must tell me what you do in school, and what you read, so when you come back I'll always know what you're talking about."

"You'll be going to school yourself," he reminded her.

"Oh, *Reno!*" She dismissed it with scorn. "But I will pay attention now, truly I will, and I'll try to remember what I learn, especially geography."

"Sierra Nevada," he murmured, and smiled without looking towards her.

"What was the other one you said, that first day? What was the other Sierra?"

"Sierra Leone."

"Where's that?"

"Africa. It's got a very unhealthy climate. They call it the white man's grave."

"I'll take the mountains in California."

"Me too."

"Oh, Jamie, you *won't* forget me, will you?" she entreated. "Swear you'll come back some day! *Swear!*"

"I swear." He smiled again, confidentially, into the cottonwood branches overhead. "Sierra Nevada. You can't forget a girl with a name like that!"

* * *

September 19, 1923.—Today they said Good-by on the front veranda of the ranch house. The Ford was waiting at the bottom of the steps, with the luggage in it. Mrs. Montgomery's gay chatter ran on in the middle distance.

"—such a perfectly charming time, thanks to you good people, and I expected to be so bored! Goodness knows, I've put on pounds and pounds, all because of your wonderful Chinese cook! I'll certainly tell every-

one I know to come here if ever they're getting a divorce—" And so forth.

"Well—" said James, and they looked at each other as children can, without defenses. He was wearing the blue serge suit again, and it had got a bit snugger here and there.

"Oh, Jamie, what shall I *do*—?"

"You stay right here, that's what you do, till I get back. You stay right here on the ranch, so I don't lose you."

"Yes, Jamie."

"I'm the one that's got to do the traveling," he said grimly. "I'll send you an address whenever I know what it's going to be."

"Yes, Jamie."

"As long as I know you're here at Bar X it won't be so bad. I can shut my eyes and—"

"Come, James, we're keeping everybody waiting. Say Good-by to Sierra, and come along."

"Good-by," he said, and smiled at her.

But Sierra threw her arms round his neck with a sob.

"You mustn't cry," he said against her hair. "Everybody's looking."

"Oh, my goodness, you've forgotten to give him back his watch!" cried Donna's gentle voice. "Take it off this minute, Sierra, just think, he might have missed his train!"

"I gave it to her," said James, as Sierra released him and stepped back against the railing in dismay, both hands behind her.

"Well, that's very nice of you, James, but I really

can't allow her to keep such a valuable present. Give it back at once, Sierra."

"Oh, Mom, please let me—"

"Do as I say, Sierra."

"Never mind," said James very low, as he helped her to unfasten the strap. "I'll get you a better one some day."

"I'd rather have this one!" gulped Sierra.

"I know. Don't cry, now, when I've gone. You promised."

"I won't. Truly, I won't!"

"Do hurry up, James!" insisted his mother from the back seat of the Ford.

Ah, me, remarked Asmilius philosophically, receding after James— *Ah, me, and the worst is yet to come.*

2

August 21, 1927.—Things would be clearer, these days, if I could get a few words with Asmilius. Somehow, some time, we're going to be in touch with each other again—unless everything goes dead wrong, that is. There ought to be a way for Angels on the same job, as it were, to communicate with each other from time to time. We know by the Chart as it unrolls, roughly what is supposed to happen if all goes according to Plan. But we have no way of comparing notes as we go along, and until Asmilius turns up again, out of the blue, I shan't know exactly when James is coming back into Sierra's life.

I've got interested in this job. I've got fond of my Sierra. I want to do everything possible for her, and I'm beginning to suspect that the cards have been stacked against her. Such a thing can happen. Especially if something really great is at stake, I've noticed that the going is likely to be extra hard, at least for a while.

James and Sierra, for instance, were much too young for what happened to them at their first meeting. It will be years before they can direct their own lives, and yet they must be haunted meanwhile by a sense of

what they want and what they must do. There will be deflections during their dependent years. But if they allow themselves to be sidetracked into other loves they will only be wretched, always seeking, never content—because of the thing they saw in each other's eyes that first day in the yard of the ranch house, when she looked down at him from David's back, and he stood gazing up, as at his heaven.

There is so little one can do to help them. That is what I keep harping on as the years slip by. I can see to it that she doesn't forget him, of course, but that doesn't make her any happier now. God doesn't intend to make it easy for them, I can see that. Sometimes I think He is a little niggardly, but the answer to that Up There is simply that He is not a sentimentalist. If only He doesn't forget these two. One is not permitted to imply that He ever forgets anything, but I don't know how else to account for some of the things I've seen. Things that look like sheer carelessness at best. I keep wishing there was some way to nag Him.

It was asking a good deal of human nature for them to keep in touch by letter all this time. He wrote to her faithfully for a long while—from New York and then London, from Eton, from Brittany, Paris, Rome, or Biarritz, on his strangely adult holidays, for his mother took him everywhere with her, American fashion, instead of dumping him down in the country somewhere with a tutor during his vacations, as his step-father no doubt advised and would have preferred. So by the time Sierra's letters got back to him

he must often have moved on, or forgotten what he had written to her—for it seemed as though his letters were never in direct reply to hers, but were only general information, to keep her posted on his doings and movements. He wrote well, and was not afraid to mention that he missed her and wanted to see her again. For instance, last winter—

Annersley Hall,
Annersley, Berks.
December 26, 1926.

DEAR SIERRA—

I am here for the Christmas hols. staying with Edward Inglefield, whom I think I may have mentioned to you before. He is called Nannie, I should explain, because he will be the Duke of Annersley when his father dies, which is a thing nobody is looking forward to at all, as he (the Duke) is a very decent old bird. Edward has a sister Joyce, who is about my age, and she has a school friend staying with her, too, somewhat younger, so there are four of us, which makes it very jolly. We go riding every morning in the park—nothing but English saddles here, how you'd hate 'em!—we lunch upstairs by ourselves and have tea with the grown-ups in the drawing-room, and then are shunted back to the schoolroom while everyone goes very high-class for dinner. It's a hunting crowd and very posh.

This could be a very dull life if I had to stick to it forever, but it's all right for a change from school. In

England you are kept very much in your place till you finish school if you're a boy, and till you're out if you're a girl—and your place is somewhere between the upper servants and the yard-dogs, I can't make it out much nearer than that. You're allowed in the drawing-room, that is, but only just. Joyce vows she's going to be presented next year, but I don't see how she can make it without wangling a couple of extra birthdays in the meantime. She is very attractive, but after all, only a kid. Her friend Geraldine has just one idea in the world, and that's to be a screen star. I'll bet she will be too. Her people don't think much of it as a goal, being very Mayfair themselves.

This is just to say that I am thinking of you at Christmas time, and wondering what you are doing. It's funny, but when I think of you it's always summer. I suppose there is snow on the ground there now, but it's hard to imagine. I would rather be spending Christmas with you at Bar X than here at Annersley, and don't let anybody tell you different. Some day we will have Christmas together, if I have anything to say about it.

Please give my love to your mother, and remember me to David and Monte and the rest.

JAMIE

Sierra was the awkward one. She has never learned to express herself on paper, and her plodding catalogue of ranch minutiae must have made dry reading to James. She hasn't the knack of getting her love and loneliness into the envelopes.

DEAR JAMIE—

It was very nice to get your Christmas letter. I would have answered it long ago but I have been kind of busy, with school and all. We were snowed right up for three days.

There is not much news here, Joe got pretty drunk last week, we don't know where he got it. It isn't really a habit with him, he only falls off the wagon about twice a year. Pop says it's his Indian blood coming out.

Bessie had something wrong with her eye and had to be shot, you remember Bessie, she was the one who had pups when you were here. She was getting pretty old for a dog, but I felt very badly about it.

I have to write a theme about Rowena in "Ivanhoe" for tomorrow, I wish you were here to help me, I expect you know what it is all about.

Well, it would certainly have been nice if you could have been here for Christmas. We had a tree and all the boys came up from the bunk-house and the Biscoes drove out from Reno, and after we'd had our presents Pop and I played "Holy Night" and everybody sang it. I thought of you.

SIERRA

The letter from Annersley is the last we have had from James. Since then there have been a few post-cards—he was in Paris at Easter time—but now there has been nothing for several weeks. Sierra minds, she has not forgotten him, and yet whole days go by that she never thinks of him at all. Time and space are getting in their fatal work.

Big John died last night. He was old enough to be her grandfather, but all the same it has come as a terrible shock to everybody. Donna is fifty-three, and in spite of having Sierra she will bury most of her happiness and all of her youth in her husband's grave. They were very devoted to each other. The child was a beloved toy, a precious sort of hobby, to them, but they were a long time without her and their real lives belonged to each other.

Donna has a sister living in Salt Lake City, and she is taking Sierra there after the funeral. Bar X will be closed while they are away. It only loses money nowadays, anyhow. James will be upset when he learns that hereafter when he closes his eyes he is picturing her against a background which is no longer the right one.

* * *

March 10, 1928.—There have been no letters at all from James since we came to Salt Lake City. He has never replied to Sierra's letter written at the time of her father's death and our departure from the ranch six months ago, which she sent to the London address, as it was during Eton's summer holidays. She thinks he has forgotten her at last, but I try to convince her that the letter never got to him. She still keeps in touch with Pop and the boys, most of whom are now at the Lazy Y, a few miles the other side of Reno, where the owner has put in private bathrooms and is catering to the dude trade.

Sierra and her mother were to stay here in Salt Lake

City only through the Christmas season, which would have been sad for them at home. But now Donna grows less and less inclined to return to the loneliness she must face at Bar X. Sierra was put to school here at the new semester, and has suddenly discovered for herself the solace of reading. James has always known it, but it is a new world for Sierra. She devours books now, good and bad, whatever she happens to take off the shelf at the public library. She has as yet no taste, only appetite. James is missing something that would be a real delight to him—the sudden flowering of her intelligence. She has always had superb health, vitality, and horse sense. If ever her education catches up with the rest of her, she will be one of the most irresistible creatures the world has ever seen. "I'm ignorant," she keeps saying frankly. "I must learn."

They have already discovered her concertina and her natural singing voice at the school, and she is much in demand for impromptu concerts and class programs. She has begun to take singing lessons from a competent teacher. Her complete lack of stage-fright makes a great impression, and her sheer vitality is magnetic. She is utterly without self-consciousness before any audience, thanks to her bunk-house training and that cast-iron nervous system of hers. What have I got on my hands, I wonder!

* * *

August 29, 1929.—When Sierra turned eighteen last June her birthday present from Donna was a visit to the Lazy Y to see Pop and Joe and the boys, who were

alleging that she must have forgotten how to sit on a horse with all the city life she'd had. The divorce business is brisk just now, and the Lazy Y ranch was full. Sierra had a little room at the back, looking out over the yard, and she could go down the back way to the corral and nobody amongst the dude clientele saw much of her. She wasn't interested in them.

David has been gathered to his fathers, but there was a horse named Jake that she took to, and Joe has been keeping her saddle for her. Naturally, she brought along her concertina, and naturally Pop produced his, and they would sit on the steps of the bunk-house in the evening and sing all the old songs he had taught her. Pop says he always did think she sang fine, but he admits there may be some slight improvement since the regular singing lessons began. The old songs are nostalgic things, especially in these surroundings—for one bunk-house is after all pretty much like another—and it brings out a quality her voice has never had before, to sing those old songs, the ones that James liked best, that summer when they picnicked under the cottonwood tree by the river.

And so naturally the thing had to happen. They were heard up at the big house.

People took to leaning over the veranda rail to listen—and then some of them drifted down across the yard to where the singing was. They saw Sierra sitting on the bunk-house steps, in blue denim pants and a boy's shirt with the sleeves rolled up over her round brown arms, her hair (not so bleached out now by the sun) tied back with a ribbon. They saw the lazy concertina

in her lap, seeming to play itself, and Pop at her feet performing with his customary *élan* and a good deal of elbow. They saw the half dozen other boys sitting round in informal attitudes, waiting to join in the choruses.

It was picturesque and tuneful and entirely unartificial. Sierra dresses that way because to her those are the normal clothes for ranch house life; she sings because it comes natural to her; and she prefers the company of the hands because she has known them all her life and speaks their language and feels at home among them. To a man, they adore her, and it shows in their faces while she sings with them—an unself-conscious worship, uncomplicated and sincere.

The dude people from the big house thought it was pretty cute at first, and then they became sort of fascinated. It was real music, and these were real human beings, with the masks off, relaxed and at peace with themselves and their simple small world which the dudes knew nothing of.

Because the greater part of the clientele at the big house moved down into the yard each evening away from their arm-chairs and iced drinks, the singers were soon invited up to the veranda by Ted Anderson, the owner of the Lazy Y. A little surprised, and a little regretful at the loss of a certain privacy and freedom of choice which had been theirs—for the dude people took to calling out the names of songs they had heard before and wanted to hear again—Sierra and the boys obediently moved their evening concert up to the steps of the big house. The applause they encountered there

hindered them a little, but they tried not to take much notice of it.

When Sierra's month's visit was up and she mentioned going home to Salt Lake City, Ted Anderson offered her five dollars a week and her keep for as long as she liked to stay on and sing for the clientele each night. Sierra said she thought the boys ought to get paid if she did, because they were singing on their overtime, and four of them, including Pop and Joe, did a deal with Anderson at two dollars each, which caused them to regard Sierra as a financial tycoon.

Sierra wrote to her mother in Salt Lake City and got permission to stay on. And then she wrote to James—at the London address—to tell him what had happened, because singing the old songs had made her think of him again, in the old way. And when that happens her voice takes on color and depth, and her face becomes the face of a child—who has fallen in love.

DEAR JAMIE—

Well, here I am back on a ranch again, and while it isn't the dear old Bar X it's the next best thing, as all the boys are here and it feels almost like home. I only came for a visit, but a very funny thing has happened. I am being *paid* to sing!

It seems the people up at the house get very bored waiting for their divorces, and there aren't any good ~~shows~~ for them to see in Reno, not like what they're used to in the East, and so they got to coming down to listen to us at the bunk-house, till Ted Anderson

decided to have us up on the veranda every night. I get \$5 a week just for singing! And they applaud after each number just like in a theater!

There is a man here now by the name of Billy Entwistle, they say his folks are awfully rich from tobacco, and he married a waitress while he was still in college and they have paid her a lot of money and sent him out here to get a divorce because she wouldn't come. It sounds pretty crazy, maybe I haven't got it straight, but anyway, he is ambitious to play the concertina, so every afternoon I give him a lesson. He wanted to pay me for it, but I said I hadn't paid Pop when he taught me, and he (Mr. E.) said I was the most logical woman he had ever known. Nobody ever called me a woman before, but after all, I am 18.

It is a little difficult to know how to take him sometimes, especially when he pays me compliments, but he says in the East people aren't afraid to show their feelings the way we are out here. He has lovely manners, and picks things up for me and holds the door open for me the way you used to do. It's been six years since I saw you, it doesn't seem possible, but I wonder if now that you're grown up too if you're anything like Mr. Entwistle. I asked him if he knew anything about Eton and he said only that Waterloo was won there, which I guess was just one of his jokes. He's quite handsome, with curly hair.

Well, I hope to hear from you soon about how the prospects are for your ever getting back here. Unless maybe you don't want to come any more.

SIERRA

It was only a few days after this rather pathetic document was sent off to England that Mr. Entwhistle mistook Sierra's entirely academic interest in his feelings and his lovely manners for an invitation to proceed along more or less the same lines which had succeeded so well with the waitress, and a most unfortunate scene ensued.

It happened, inevitably, during a concertina lesson, the nature of which seemed to require that the young and impressionable Mr. Entwhistle sit quite close to Sierra on the sofa, leaning over to watch her fingers on the keys.

"I know what it is you smell of!" he exclaimed suddenly in surprise. "*Soap!*"

"Well, of course," said Sierra. "Why not?"

For a moment more he sat staring at her unhappily, incredulously.

"You lovely thing!" he cried, his eyes going from her fair hair to her wide, honest eyes and her soft, unrouged mouth. "You divine, adorable thing!" And apparently taking leave of his senses, he threw his arms around her, concertina and all, and buried his face in her neck. After a second's horrified immobility, Sierra reacted sturdily in such a way that the concertina fell to the floor and she was on her feet and Mr. Entwhistle was left empty-handed.

"Don't ever do that again!" cried Sierra furiously.

"Now, don't be angry, pet, I only—"

"And don't call me *pet!* Sometimes I don't think you're anything like Jamie after all!"

"Like who?"

"That's not the sort of thing he'd do," said Sierra severely, as though Mr. Entwhistle had willfully stepped out of character. "If he wanted to kiss me, he'd ask, and—and then if it was you I could say No!" she finished confusedly, and picked up the concertina herself and started for the door.

"Now, wait a minute, honey," began Mr. Entwhistle, recovering a little. "There's no need to go off half-cocked just because I— Come back here, you little goose, and teach me to play the concertina!"

"You'll never learn from me now," said Sierra coldly. "I was only doing it anyway because sometimes you almost reminded me of Jamie, and I—"

"Who in hell is *Jamie*?"

"He's the boy I'm going to marry when we grow up," said Sierra, putting it into words for the first time, but without any astonishment. And she went out and banged the door.

A Mrs. Ackland arrived at the Lazy Y a few days ago—she has come to Reno for the usual reason—and on her first evening she was heard to drop a bitter remark about "local talent" when Sierra and the boys took their places on the veranda steps after dinner.

At the end of their second song, Mrs. Ackland got up quietly and went inside the house. Pretty soon she came back and sat down again, her chin in her hand, watching and listening. Her Angel, one Talmius I don't remember ever encountering before, moved over and thanked me with a grin. I asked why. Talmius said that it was due to Sierra's singing that Mrs. Ackland had

rung up her husband in New York just now, and he was coming out here on the run, and they only needed to see one another again to patch things up, as this divorce project wasn't on the Chart at all and had been very worrying.

Mr. Ackland arrived yesterday morning—a very smart-looking, forty-ish man with a clipped mustache, squinting blue eyes, and a dead-pan drollery in sharp contrast with the dark vivacity of his wife, who is very attractive in a hard sort of way. I can see what Talmius meant. She ran out to meet him when the Ford drove up, and they kissed before they remembered the divorce at all, and there's no doubt about how they really feel about each other. It was not some sentimental memory connected with one of Sierra's songs which has brought them together again, though, as one might suppose. Mr. Ackland is a theatrical agent, and Mrs. Ackland knows a good thing, infallibly, when she sees it.

Last night Mr. Ackland heard Sierra and the rest lead off (by request) with "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie" and "Ragtime Cowboy Joe"—and his expression remained carefully noncommittal. Then Mrs. Ackland spoke softly out of the darkness where she sat beside him with her hand through his elbow. "Sing that one about 'Long, long ago,'" she suggested.

Sierra obliged, her head resting against the veranda rail, moonlight flooding her face which had what I can only call the James-look on it.

Mr. Ackland stirred, and muttered something to himself. "I told you, Robbie, I told you!" whispered

his wife. "Didn't I tell you?" she whispered again at the end, and squeezed his arm, and he squeezed back, and hissed "Shut up!" because Sierra's murmuring concertina was finding its casual way into "La Golondrina."

The Acklands left for New York this morning, together, very much in a hurry. The divorce is off. They had a talk with Pop and Sierra before they went, and they said she would Hear From Them.

I'm afraid she will.

* * *

September 10, 1929.—The letter from the Acklands came today, in the same mail with a post-card from James, mailed in Rome two months ago and forwarded from Reno to Salt Lake City and finally back again by a somewhat forgetful Donna. I am convinced that with all this knocking about on the Continent he fails to receive half Sierra's letters—or else (remembering As-milius' prophecy) somebody on his end, which can only mean his mother, is deliberately holding them back. This card says simply that his step-father died very suddenly and his mother closed up the London house and they went to Italy with friends—and then, squeezed into the lower corner: "It looks as though we may be coming home!" There is no address for a reply.

This makes of the Ackland communication rather an anticlimax, so far as Sierra is concerned, though it is exciting enough in its way. Sierra and the four boys are to go to New York at once, all expenses paid, and sing for the people who run a rodeo there each

autumn. The letter specifies that they are to bring with them the same clothes they wear here at the ranch. They will start as soon as Donna can get here from Salt Lake City to go along.

* * *

October 25, 1929.—Well, I'm in for it now, and no mistake! I expected her to do well in New York, but this is overdoing it a little, perhaps. I mean, we could have done with less.

Or could we?

Anyway, Talmius, who takes a proprietary interest in her now, says she had the whole thing licked at her first audition, which was on the bare stage of a dirty Broadway theater under a raking overhead light. Before the audition began, Mrs. Ackland insisted on Sierra's going into an empty dressing-room and changing into her blue denims, so as to fit into the picture. Besides the Acklands and Donna, a skeptical group of five other people, one of them a big man with an unlighted cigar, and one of them a granite-faced middle-aged woman, sat half way back in the dark cavern of the auditorium.

Sierra arrived on the empty stage the same way she had arrived at the ranch house steps each evening—the concertina nestled in the crook of her arm, a ribbon holding back her hair—unhurried, relaxed, at her ease. The boys closed in behind her a little sheepishly, their hats in their hands, relying on her leadership just as they did at home. Pop carried his own concertina.

They all ambled down to where five chairs stood in a stiff row behind the footlights, which were dead. Sierra sat down in one chair and laid her right ankle across her left knee to make a cradle for the concertina, which began to move gently between her strong brown hands, warming up. The boys scraped the other chairs round till they were at crazy, random angles, and then sat astride them, or leaned on the backs, or sat on the floor with an elbow on the seat—so they could see her face while they sang. Casually, one or two at a time, the two concertinas leading the way, they went into "The Old Chisholm Trail."

They finished it to a dead silence out front, and began the next song, following from memory the program Mrs. Ackland had written out for them.

"'Whe-en I left home, boys,
My mother for me cried,
She begged me not to leave her,
For me she would have died.

"'My mother's heart is breaking,
Breaking for me, that's all,
And with God's help I'll see her
When the work's all done this fall.'"

And so on, through verses reeking with the light-hearted woe of the ranges, down to—

"'Poor Charlie was buried at sunrise,
No tombstone at his head,

Nothing but a little slab,
And this is what it said:

“ ‘Charlie died at daybreak,
He di-ied from a fall,
And he'll not see his mother,
When the work's all done this fall.' ”

Nobody moved out front.

With scarcely a pause, the singers did “La Golondrina,” which Joe had picked up in Texas once. Their eyes rested on each other as they sang, smiling, affectionate, pleased with a good minor. They were entirely undisconcerted by the pitiless light under which they sat, or by the total lack of response from out front. They had been told to sing this and that, and they sang as they would always sing, the best they knew, to give pleasure to whoever was listening to them, and not to put themselves across. They had not thought of themselves.

The big man with the unlighted cigar was called Saul by all the rest who sat with him in the darkened theater. Gradually Saul became hypnotized by the group on the stage. They were something new to him. They were real. He had never seen anything like them. A mermaid wet from the sea could not have fascinated him more than Sierra did, in her utter innocence of stage-fright, and her touching oblivion to his own fearsome presence. He sat forward, his chin resting on his fat hands which gripped the back of the seat in front of him, his cigar jutting. The

others nudged each other, with knowing glances at his rocky profile. Mrs. Ackland suppressed an hysterical giggle. It was working. She had told them it would.

The singers came to the end of the short list she had given them, and Sierra looked out into the black front of the house where she knew Mrs. Ackland sat.

"That's all," she said, and grinned.

"Is that all you know?" demanded Saul, without moving.

"Oh, we know lots more," Sierra told him gently, "but that's all Mrs. Ackland wrote down."

"Sing me another one," said Saul.

So she sang him "Long, Long Ago," alone except for the echo of men's voices on the refrain, while Mrs. Ackland squirmed in her seat with delight. She had gambled heavily on an encore, and she had won.

"That's the best of the lot," said Saul at the end. "We'll keep that in."

After turning his back on the Acklands for a brief huddle with the other five, who then got up and departed, he seemed in a kind of happy trance as he herded Sierra and the boys up to his office above the theater and put contracts in front of them, at what was to them a fabulous figure and what Mr. Ackland maintained was highway robbery. It meant they were to sing three songs at every performance of the rodeo at Madison Square Garden in October, as the Special Feature.

Dazed, with surreptitious, goggle-eyed glances at each other, Sierra and the boys wrote their names where Mr. Ackland put his finger, and thanked everybody politely.

"They'll want to fix her up—get a fancy suit designed for her like the trick riders wear," said Saul.

"They will over my dead body!" cried Mrs. Ackland. "Want her to look as though all she can do is hang head downwards at a gallop?"

"Oh, sure, she can do those things if you want," Pop assured them, very off-hand. "Sierra knows how to ride."

"So do a lot of other people!" snapped Mrs. Ackland, with a squelching glance. "Listen, Saul, if you let the Garden put her into a silk jockey suit I'll wring your fat neck. They're signing her on as a specialty—a stand-out. Well, make them keep her that way, for God's sake!"

Saul raised his eyebrows at Mrs. Ackland's husband, who in turn raised both hands palm upwards and his shoulders, indicating that he was only her husband, after all. Saul turned on Sierra the terrible battery of his undivided attention.

"What would you like to wear in the ring, kid?" he inquired with ponderous kindness.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Sierra easily. "Whatever you and Mrs. Ackland decide."

Saul looked as though he had been hit over the head with a club, for this was to him the most extraordinary thing she had done yet—to leave to someone else the choice of what she wore before

an audience. "See?" demanded Mrs. Ackland, of nobody in particular. "See what I mean?"

"Sierra Thompson—what kind of a name is that?" Saul grumbled, glaring at her signature on the contract to show that he had a little recovered.

"You might as well have called her Sierra Nevada and the hell with it!" suggested Mr. Ackland, with an apologetic grin at Donna who was sitting silent and bewildered among them.

"Robbie, that's not a bad idea!" said his wife, and they gazed at each other in mutual rapture.

"Sierra Nevada!" he breathed reverently. "That's what we want! Lorna, that's it! Thompson is out. Sierra Nevada! What a name for lights on a marquee!"

"Oh, no, I couldn't—!" Sierra began, and wilted before the surprised gaze of the whole room. "I mean—I'd rather not. You see, that was a sort of pet-name once and—I'd feel sort of queer to—"

"Sure, it's a pet-name," said Saul, and lit the cigar. "It'll be a pet-name all America will fall for when we've gone to work on it."

Well, so far things were happening about as I had expected. I was prepared for that much.

When it came to the first rehearsal at the Garden in the vast arena, with spotlights and pendent microphones and so on, everybody began to have qualms—everybody, that is, but the ones who were to sing. They ambled obligingly through a dozen or so numbers, while a final selection was made by the authorities. With endless patience they cheerfully did their

act over and over again until the horses had got the idea and could be depended on. They all stood quietly, at ease, whispering loving nonsense into the flattered, twitching ears of their mounts, while microphones and spotlights wavered and fumbled and found them and picked them up to everybody's satisfaction. The only hitch was when they got hungry in the middle of it, and a boy had to be sent out for sandwiches and coffee.

"She hasn't got a nerve in her whole body," marveled Mrs. Ackland, where she sat hanging over the rail of a front-row box. "She's never been stood up, nor slapped down. She wouldn't know an inferiority complex if she fell over it. She's a child of heaven!"

"It's because she's so goddamned *healthy*!" explained Mr. Ackland, who goes around these days looking rather like a proud father about to hand out the cigars.

"I wish I had her poise!" grunted Saul, from his position against the front wall of the box with his feet in the tan-bark.

"And don't you wish you had the whites of her eyes, you rum-soaked baboon!" Mr. Ackland commiserated affectionately. "She's no work of art, Saul. That's Nature you see before you. That skin, those teeth, the set of that head on those shoulders—pure Nature. This town never saw anything like it before. She'll lead 'em around by the nose!"

"And she hasn't an idea what it's all about," Saul mused aloud. "But she doesn't mind that either. She isn't dumb, though. You couldn't rattle her with a

charge of dynamite, but that isn't because she's stupid. She's got something. I don't get it. What's she got, Lorna?"

"You wouldn't know," Mrs. Ackland told him kindly. "But whatever it is, boys, this is the one you've got to thank for it." And her eyes met the misty gaze of Donna Thompson, sitting like a mouse in the corner of the box while they dissected and descanted upon the only child of Big John, whom she had loved. Lorna reached over to lay a warm hand on the tense fingers which gripped each other in Donna's lap.

"Whatever it is, it's her own," said Donna, not quite steadily. "Her father—always used to say What had we done to deserve her."

Well, the rodeo opened last night, with Sierra Nevada and Her Four Ranch Hands as the Feature Number. And as near as a rodeo can be stopped, they stopped it, for no reason that anyone can give except that they are so Real.

Mrs. Ackland had her way, and they wore their own clothes, even more sober and practical clothes than those worn by the pick-up men, amongst all the gaudy silks and nail-studded *chaps*. Very clean they looked as they rode out single file into the dimmed arena under a following spotlight. Very simple—very engaging—very *real* . . .

"It's early in the spring that we round up the dogies,
We mark them and brand them and bob up their tails,
We round up our horses, load up the chuck wagon,
And then throw the dogies out on to the trail.

"Whoopy-*ti-yi-yo-o*,
Git along, lit-tle do-gies,
It's your misfortune and none of my own,
Whoopy-*ti-yi-yo-o*,
Git along, lit-tle do-gies,
You know that Wyoming will be your new home.

"It's whooping and yelling and driving the dogies,
And oh, how I *wish* you would only go on—"

Once round the arena they rode in single file, the ambling steps of their ponies beating out the time the crooning concertinas set, their voices fresh and uninhibited and artless, while the professional band in its shining silk shirts sat silent and delighted on its platform, with its toes tapping out a secret echo of the plodding day's-end tempo.

The creak of the saddle leather could be heard as they passed close along the rail in front of the boxes full of people in evening dress. The shift of Sierra's quick brown fingers on the keys of her concertina could be seen by the front rows, and the strong lines in the faces of the four men who followed her, singing, relaxed, at their ease, their lean bodies giving to the movement of their ponies, their ropes coiled tidily on the pommels—homeward bound.

A small log fire had been set out from one side while they rode—to most of the audience it had appeared as if by magic when Sierra and the boys came to it as the song ended—and they dismounted, dropping the

reins over the ponies' heads. The boys sat down by the fire as it were wearily, one by one, and stretched themselves out to rest. Sierra left her concertina in Joe's lap and wandered a little apart, the bridle over her arm, the pony nuzzling affectionately at her shoulder—and the white spotlight followed her, leaving the blues on the group round the fire so that a warm glow shone up into the faces of the men with the concertinas.

Alone in the middle of the big arena, wearing her clean, faded blue jeans, her beaver hat pushed back, her fair hair curving to her shoulders, Sierra stood and sang "Long, Long Ago," with the echo of men's voices on the refrain. The vast audience listened to the simple, half-forgotten melody of the old song, a little puzzled at first, a little incredulous that this thing was actually being done to them—and finally with a stinging of the eyelids and a tightening of the throat.

When she had finished, she drifted back to the fire, taking the spotlight with her, the pony following close at her heels. The boys picked themselves up off the ground one by one, they all mounted again with the cowboy's slow-motion ease, and with Sierra leading rode once more round the rail, more briskly now, for the short rest. . . .

"Woke up one morning on the old Chisholm Trail,
With a rope in my hand and a cow by the tail,
Come-a-ti-yi-yoopy-yoopy-yay, yoopy-yay,
Come-a-ti-yi-yoopy-yoopy-yay-ay-ay-ay-yay!"

"I'm up in the morning afore daylight,
And afore I sleep the moon is bright,
Come-a-ti-yi-yoopy-yoopy-yay, yoopy-yay,
Come-a-ti-yi-yoopy-yoopy-yay-ay-ay-ay-yay!"

"It's bacon and beans most every day,
I'd sooner be eatin' prairie hay—"

Just before they reached the exit the applause began, beating down on the five small, ambling figures in the spotlight, drowning out the bright, receding voices, breaking into yells and stamping of feet as the galleries got going, so that Donna, trembling in a box with the Acklands, sat with tears running down her cheeks and her hands pressed together in her lap, and Robert Ackland blew his nose without shame, and Saul—Saul lighted his cigar.



November 1, 1929.—This morning—Friday—she signed a film contract for Hollywood. That too was inevitable. Sound films are coming in. Silents are finished. Sierra Nevada, the Singing Cowgirl.

Sierra doesn't think she'll mind Hollywood, but Donna has her doubts. Things are moving pretty fast for Donna. Pop and Sierra take it all in their stride. There is no conceit in Sierra. To her this opportunity, for which a thousand girls would give their immortal souls, is merely a little something extra to lay at James's feet when he gets home. She figures that perhaps, even if she isn't as well-educated as he is, and

can't spell very well on top of that, perhaps if she is a famous movie star he will forgive her for not having read everything he has. She figures too that perhaps, if he has any trouble earning money just at first, hers will do just as well. It does not occur to her that it can make the slightest difference to him which of them has earned the money, so long as they have it.

So things are getting pretty complicated at a very fast rate of speed, and I can see Asmilius's face from here when she offers James the use of her bank account. That particular balloon is due to go up some time tomorrow, I should think, because at tonight's performance as the lights went down for Sierra's entrance I suddenly saw Asmilius coming towards me with a well-it's-about-time expression. James was all we needed, and now we've got him.

Box 9—dinner jacket—six-feet-two—Princeton, '31—what more could you ask? said Asmilius smugly.

And yes, there was James in Box 9, which held his mother's party; James sitting with his long legs doubled up in cramped space, all knees and elbows, faultlessly tailored, I must say, and his eyes still dark blue with up-curving lashes. He was scrabbling through his program in the dark, trying to find the name of the girl who was riding round the rail in the spotlight, singing about little dogies and Wyoming—TRICK AND FANCY ROPING—no—COWBOYS' CALF-ROPING CONTEST—no—EVENT NO. 8: SIERRA NEVADA, THE SINGING COWGIRL, AND HER FOUR RANCH HANDS—

It caught him right in the pit of the stomach and back of the tonsils. Sierra Nevada. You can't forget a girl with a name like that, James. . . .

They came to the camp-fire and the boys dropped down beside it, one by one, so that Sierra was left standing alone. And then, as though he was not already on the edge of delirium, she sang the song he had always liked best—the one her mother had always sung her to sleep with—and the words of it reached him dimly, through the ears of a boy who lay in the grass on the bank of a river, staring up into the cottonwood tree overhead—

“Tell me the tales that to me were so dear,

Long, long ago,

Long, long ago,

Sing me the songs I delighted to hear,

Long, long ago,

Long ago.

“Now you are come, all my grief is removed,

Let me forget that so long you have roved,

Let me believe that you love as you loved,

Long, long ago,

Long ago.

“Do you remember the path where we met?

Long, long ago,

Long, long ago,

Ah, yes, you told me you ne'er would forget—”

Promise that no matter what happens while I'm gone—or how long it is—you will always remember today—don't cry, Sierra—I don't think I can stand it if you cry—I'll write to you—I'll come back—as soon as I can—don't cry, my darling—I'm here now—I'm here, Sierra. . . .

Asmilius told me later, in graphic detail, what happened to James after that. It appears that he sat perfectly still, almost without drawing breath, until towards the end of the third song when he realized that she was leaving the arena, riding away from him, out of his sight. As the lights went up on the roar of applause that always drowned the exit, James rose blindly and began to climb over people towards the stairs, and his mother caught his sleeve.

"What is it, James, what are you doing?"

His face as it turned towards her was like a sleep-walker's.

"That's Sierra," he said flatly. "I've got to talk to her."

"James, are you crazy? Sit down!"

"It's Sierra." He tried to focus momentarily on her astonishment as she sat looking up at him, holding to his sleeve. "You remember the kid at the ranch near Reno. I've got to get to her—"

"Well, perhaps after the show, dear—not now. You can't see her while the performance is going on, it's against the rules or something."

"But I—"

"Do sit down, James, you're in everybody's way!" Her hand, so small in its diamond rings, so firm, so

impossible to dislodge without actual roughness, pressed him back into his chair. He sat quite still again, while they wrestled steers in the tan-bark, and his knees felt watery and his ears were buzzing. Sierra. After a lifetime, Sierra. . . .

Events Nos. 9, 10, 11, and 12 went on below him—bronc riding, steer riding, the wild horse race, and so forth—and he sat hunched in his chair feeling sick and weak and glad. He knew his mother didn't intend to let him out of her sight when the performance was over. But as they left the box he managed to fall behind, turned, and plunged in the opposite direction, his progress towards the performers' entrance under the band strewn with incoherent apologies. Finally he arrived more or less by instinct at the top of a flight of steps which led down into a strong smell of horse and cattle-pens. Expecting to be thrown out any minute he descended, and found nothing to bar his way except a No Admittance sign on a gate giving on to an alley between the long-horn pens, where no one could conceivably want to go anyway. Wooden saw-horses holding saddles were massed together in a corner. People in ranch clothes passed him purposefully, going about their own business. Nobody took any notice of him. Nobody seemed to care if he stayed there all night. He planted himself desperately in front of a striding cowboy in a red shirt.

"Sierra Nevada," he said, and his voice squeaked oddly in his own ears. "Do you know where I can find Sierra Nevada?"

"Gone back to the hotel, I reckon. She mostly leaves right after her Event."

"Where does she go? I mean, where is she staying?"

"I dunno, buddy, she ain't never give me her telephone number." The cowboy slid away and was gone, up the stairs.

A strip of matting led away tidily to one side of the long-horns, and following it James came to the horse-stalls, and realized that he wouldn't know the horse she had ridden if he saw it. He had had no time to look at her horse. The place was emptying rapidly. He asked several more people about Sierra, but they all looked at him sidewise and knew nothing. His immaculate English evening clothes were not reassuring to them, and news of the film contract was leaking out. They suspected him of wanting to take her out to supper, and they were entirely right. "Hi, Sierra," they would say to her tomorrow. "One of those city slickers in a wing collar was askin' for you last night. Better watch out, or the goblins'll git you in this here Noo York!" Wait till Pop heard! Not one of them but eyed James askance, and sheered off.

Outside again on Eighth Avenue, James looked at his watch and tried to pull himself together. His mother would have gone on to the St. Regis with her party. Heavens only knew what sort of story she would have made up by now about Sierra, he thought. Whatever it was, he couldn't face it. "One of James's baby-loves out of his past—a childhood sweetheart, isn't it comical?" Oh, no. Not yet, anyway.

He set out aimlessly, walking eastward along Forty-

ninth Street. There was a matinée tomorrow at two-thirty. The box-office was closed now, but early tomorrow morning he would buy a ticket for the matinée. Of course he could stand outside the stage-door, too, from about noon on. But somehow he had to wait, wait, had to live, had to keep from going crazy, till tomorrow afternoon. . . .

So you see, said Asmilius cheerfully, summing up, up, this is obviously the Real Thing.

3

November 2, 1929.—Sierra, of course, slept soundly, and her morning was filled with the activities of Mr. Ackland, now becoming known to fame as her business manager. There were press photographers at the hotel, for one thing. Sierra posed obligingly for cheese-cake, her slow, wide, friendly grin shaming the reporters' wise-cracks.

She and Donna lunched at the Ritz with the heads of the film company, and Sierra devoted herself to the food, which she found excellent but strange—the quiet center of a hurricane of talk which was in every way over her head. A Packard limousine was summoned to deliver her at the performers' entrance of the Garden when the hands of the clock stood where she usually saw them when she left the hotel made up and ready to stand round with Pop and the others awaiting the finish of Event No. 7, which was the Cowboys' Bareback Bronc Riding Contest.

As she stepped out of the car her way was suddenly blocked by a very tall young man who stammered.

"I can't stop now, Pop will be having a fit," she said breathlessly and dashed past him through the door, followed by Donna. Her eyes were on a level

with his necktie and so she did not see that his lashes curved upwards just as James's had done six years ago under the cottonwood tree.

Asmilius told me later that James found his way stumblingly into the box-seat he had bought that morning. While he was still groping for a place to put his hat, the lights went down for Sierra's entrance and he forgot his hat and began to shake. His heart was beating somewhere up under his tongue by the time he heard her voice and saw the small, sturdy figure astride the black pony leading the way along the rail.

As she approached his box James leaned forward, watching—if he stood up and reached out he could almost have touched her—and then she had passed him with the creak of saddle leather, riding so easily, just as he remembered her, but with her cool eyes fixed now between her pony's ears as though on some far horizon. James sank back in his chair and tried to swallow his heart. Sierra. Within reach of his hand.

And then she was singing alone, standing small and straight and unembarrassed in the spotlight all by herself—and once while she sang her eyes seemed to rest exactly on his face, so that his heart stopped entirely, until he realized that she was blinded by the spotlight to anything beyond its white circle. She hadn't cut him twice. Only once. Outside.

Their voices rose now in the brisker rhythm of the song which would take them out of the arena. . . .

"I went to the boss to draw my roll,
And he figgered me out nine dollars in the hole,

Come-a-ti-yi-yoopy-yoopy-yay, yoopy-yay,
Come-a-ti-yi-yoopy-yoopy-yay-ay-ay-ay-yay!

"With my knees in the saddle and my seat in the sky,
I'll be punchin' cattle in the sweet by-and-by—"

As the applause broke over the exit, James rose and blundered out of the box and raced for the stairs.

One of the bare-back bronc riders was leaving the Garden on a stretcher as James reached the bottom of the stairs this time, and some steer-riders were disappearing towards the opening which led to the arena. Sierra was nowhere to be seen. James sat down on the end of an empty saw-horse and waited. He wasn't wearing a dinner-jacket now, and they took less notice of him than ever.

At last a bandy-legged little man in cowboy clothes came along the matting from the horse-stalls, and James got up and touched his arm.

"You're Pop, aren't you?" he said, and his voice came out in a sort of squeak.

"Whazzat?" queried the old cowboy, looking 'way up to where James's face was, more than six feet in the air.

"Aren't you Pop, out at Bar X ranch?"

"I sure am, Who are you?"

"Well, I don't suppose you would remember— My name is James Montgomery."

"Well, I'll be dawgonned!" Pop pumped James's hand in genuine delight. "Well, now who'd-athought-it! Grown some, ain't you?"

"Yeh—a little," James admitted, swamped in gratitude for a friendly word from somebody. "Look, Pop—I want to find Sierra."

"Sure you do! She'll be along any minute now, just seein' to her hoss. Will she be surprised!"

"Think she'll know me?"

"Sure she will! Ain't none of us ever forgot the Prince of Wales that I know of!"

"Pop, listen—I've got to talk to Sierra. I mean quietly, without a lot of interruptions. Can you fix it for me?"

"Well, now, let's us see—" Pop rasped his chin in deep thought. "Her mother's gone back to the hotel to pack up and get some rest, and I'm supposed to see Sierra safe back there myself—"

"We could have dinner together, Pop, if you'd fix it—Sierra and I some place, just the two of us. That would sort of give us a chance to catch up. And I'll bring her back here in time for the evening performance. You make that right for me, will you—you can do that, can't you, Pop?"

"Well, I dunno, James, if I was to show up at that hotel without her—"

"Don't you think her mother will remember me?"

"Oh, sure, she'll *remember* you all right—"

"Please work it for me, Pop—I've just got to talk to Sierra—"

"Pst! Here she comes!"

"Don't tell her!" said James quickly. "Don't let on she knows me! See what she does."

They stood watching her as she approached them

unconcernedly along the strip of matting which ran between the stalls. She was dressed as she had been in the arena—blue jeans, blue shirt, beaver hat on the back of her head—except that now a small and civilized handbag was tucked under her elbow. People were passing to and fro between them as she came. She flung out a hand in greeting to another girl in black chaps and a white silk shirt, turned to say something over her shoulder to a man in one of the stalls saddling a pony. Then she saw Pop and ran a disinterested eye over his companion. More reporters.

“Ready, Pop?” she called from a distance.

“I was just—havin’ a word with a friend of mine.”

“All right, I’ll wait for you.” She turned back towards the stall where the pony was being saddled, and James was stung into normal speech.

“Hey” he said, starting after her. “You can’t do this to me!”

She glanced round, not sure the words were meant for her, and as she did so the saddled pony backed suddenly out of the stall and swung into her, broadside, knocking her hand-bag to the floor. James dived for it, and handed it back to her—for a moment he was below her, looking up.

“*Jamie!*”

She threw herself bodily at him, and as he straightened to his full height he found her in his arms. The cowboy philosophically backed the pony around them and led it away towards the arena, with a broad wink at Pop as he passed.

"Hullo," James said, and her hat fell off backwards and he laid his cheek against her hair.

"Oh, Jamie, you came back! Sometimes I thought I'd lost you!" Her grip on his shoulders was still convulsive.

"It can't be done," he reassured her, grinning down into her upturned face. "Look, now, Pop's going to fix it so we can have the time between here and the evening performance. We'll have dinner somewhere, and I'll bring you back here. O.K.?"

"Oh, *yes!*" said Sierra, like a long breath of relief.

"All right," he said, picking up her hat. "Run change your clothes. I'll wait right here."

"My city clothes are at the hotel. I'll have to go back there to change." They looked at each other in dismay. The hotel meant Donna, and Donna meant parental authority, and that might mean— Oh, but surely Donna would understand!

"Well, come along, the both of ye," said Pop, showing a little unexpected authority of his own. "I don't promise anything but I'll talk to Donna and see what I can do."

Sierra walked between them down to the hotel, which was in Forty-eighth Street, and all the way her hand was in James's and every now and then he closed his fingers tighter on hers, reassuringly. He felt conspicuous, but happy, and was surprised that rodeo clothes occasioned so little interest on Eighth Avenue. Pop ambled beside them on his high, slanted cowboy heels, making conversation. He knew that it was wasted on them, but he threw a screen of his own

words around them, leaving them to their own silence, which was the acme of tact.

"You set there," said Pop to James, pointing to a chair in the lobby. "I'll go up and see can I handle this."

James watched them into the elevator and then sat down where he had been told to. There wasn't much to occupy his mind while he waited. The performance was still on, and the lobby was nearly empty, except for a cowboy with a bandaged arm who stood reading a letter at the desk, and another cowboy who sat with his booted feet hanging over the arm of a chair and a rolled-up saddle-blanket and rope on the floor beside him, talking to two middle-aged women who wore their hats and coats. The door stood open on to the street, and the lobby was cold and cheerless. James hunched himself into his coat and prayed that Donna would not have to be taken along to dinner.

Pop and Sierra found Donna with a shiny nose and her hair in wisps, bent over the drawers of a wardrobe trunk. Both beds were full of folded garments. Sierra went straight to the clothes closet and got out her new blue suit, which had a blue silk blouse and a little hat to match, and carried it into the bathroom to change, while Pop broke the news. Donna, who had received a hasty kiss in transit and that was all, looked after her in a puzzled way and turned back to Pop for enlightenment.

"Donna," he began, settling himself on the edge of one of the beds, as for a yarn, "do you remember a

woman, came out to the ranch must be about five-six years ago, a Mrs. Montgomery?"

"Yes, of course," said Donna. "There was a boy James."

"That's the one," said Pop. "He's downstairs."

Donna stared at him, a pair of shoes in one hand.

"Lemme see, they were the same age, that makes him eighteen now," said Pop. "Looks more. 'Bout nine feet tall, he is now. But he ain't changed. He's still crazy in love with Sierra."

"What *are* you talking about?" gasped Donna.

"Funny, how things work out," said Pop reflectively. "I somehow figgered we hadn't seen the last of him. He wants to take Sierra out to dinner."

"I don't see how I can," said Donna. "I'm a sight, and there's all this packing to do. Besides, I want a bath before dinner."

"Go ahead and have it," said Pop. "Nobody said anything about you."

"You mean—let Sierra go out *alone* with him?"

"Well, why not? He's responsible. Been all over Europe, ain't he? Won't get lost just havin' dinner in Noo York."

"Well, but, I—I haven't even met him—lately," said Donna, trying to adjust her mind.

"I have. He's reg'lar. Go down and say Howdy to him, if you want to put your mind at rest. He's settin' downstairs like I told him."

Donna glanced in a mirror.

"I'm a sight," she said again. "I shopped all afternoon. Not fit to be seen. You're sure he's all right?"

"He always was," said Pop serenely. "He always will be. Looks you right in the eye. I'm tellin' you, Donna, ye might as well git used to him, we ain't seen the last of him. Doubt if we ever do, now."

"But, Pop, they haven't seen each other since they were children!"

"James is no child," said Pop. "Not any more. I seen his face when she come towards him down there at the Garden. I had a real good look. Damn' near got blinded, lookin'. Donna, it's all over with them two but the shoutin'."

Donna set down the shoes and picked up a comb.

"I guess I better go down and have a look myself," she said.

The bathroom door opened and Sierra came out, wearing the blue suit, with her hat in her hand.

"Is it all right?" she demanded, her eyes going from one to the other. "Can I go, Mom?"

"Take a look at her instead," suggested Pop. "It'll do just as good."

Donna laid down the comb and went towards her slowly. Sierra stood where she was and watched her mother anxiously—her lips were parted because her breath came so quickly, she had a shining, tiptoe, defenseless glow all round her. Suddenly she threw her arms around Donna and squeezed her hard.

"Mom, he's wonderful! Just like I expected only—only I didn't know how wonderful! Please let me go with him, Mom—we're grown up now—please!"

"Well, be sure you don't forget about the evening

show," said Donna weakly, dazed, and Sierra kissed her again and flew for the door.

When it had banged behind her, Donna and Pop looked at each other in silence, and both of them felt suddenly very old and a little sad. Their baby was gone forever.

James rose as she came out of the elevator.

"It's all right," she said. "Pop fixed it. But we mustn't forget the evening show."

"I'll remember it," he promised. "With difficulty."

They were free. For nearly four hours they were free. Emerging on to the sidewalk, they stood hand in hand in Forty-eighth Street and looked at each other, too happy to try to say how happy they were. James and Sierra. Together again.

A cab drew up beside them, questioningly. James felt for the handle and opened the door.

"Get in," he said.

Sierra got in, and he followed. The door banged. They sat there, looking at each other. Their hands were locked together on the seat between them.

"Where to, mister?"

"Uh—Central Park," said James.

As the cab lurched forward Sierra slid sidewise and pressed her face against the shoulder of James's coat-sleeve.

"I know," he said gravely. "I'm kind of dizzy myself. We'll get used to it—maybe."

She said nothing. Her eyes were closed, her cheek was pressed against his sleeve.

"How would you like to be me?" he said. "I saw

you at last night's show—and I've been all this time getting to you!"

"Last night!" Sierra sat up. "Then why on earth didn't you—"

"Yeh, that's right, why didn't I! I asked everybody I saw how to find you and nobody had your phone number!"

"But you could have—" The words dwindled away helplessly.

"I could have what?" said James. "You tell me, if you're so smart!"

She was gazing at him delightedly, finding the James she loved in the face of a strange young man—*not* a strange young man, but Jamie still, a Jamie whose presence ran through her veins like wine.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Nothing matters now. There will be lots of days."

"Lots of days," he repeated, and they smiled at each other confidently.

"Did you just *happen* to come to the show last night?" she asked then.

"I have a guardian angel," said James. "He fixed it."

"Or maybe it was mine," said Sierra, who always likes to be fair.

"Maybe they got together on it," he suggested.

"Or maybe it was God," she said solemnly.

The cab had come into Columbus Circle, and James was aware of the open window between them and the driver. So he stopped the cab at the corner by the fountain, and paid it off.

"Let's find a bench," said Sierra.

"My knees feel kind of queer too," he admitted. "You're sure you won't be cold if we sit down?"

"Oh, no!" she assured him, wine in her veins.

"So you didn't know me," he resumed, as they followed the walk down to the lake. "So you cut me dead. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"You've grown," she said.

"That's no excuse."

"Would you have known me—without my name on the program?"

"Yes, I would. As a matter of fact, I did." His hand closed gently on her elbow, as they went on down the slope, in step again. "But even if I hadn't known you were Sierra—I'd have known you were mine."

"Oh, Jamie, why didn't you *write* to me? I thought—"

"You're a nice one to talk about writing! I sent off three to your one!"

"Not really, Jamie. Some of mine must have missed you. Because you never answered things that were in them."

There was an empty bench beside the walk, with a good view of the swans. He sat her on it carefully, and folded up beside her, his arm sheltering her along the back of the bench.

"Tell me some of them," he said. "I'll answer them now."

"It's hard to know where to begin, isn't it? There's so much we don't know about each other."

"Does that matter?"

"It doesn't seem to—does it." Her clear eyes went

over him slowly, searching for strangeness in this long stranger, and finding nothing that wasn't Jamie after all.

"We'll have to tell each other the story of our lives sometime," he said comfortably, enduring her scrutiny without any embarrassment. "What did you do on your eighteenth birthday? Did you get the watch?"

"What watch?"

"Your father promised you a watch on your eighteenth birthday. Remember?"

"Dad died three years ago."

His arm came down around her shoulders.

"Sierra, I'm sorry—I didn't know—that was one of the letters that missed me."

"I thought it had, when you didn't answer. Then I guess you don't know about our leaving the ranch. Mom and I have been living in Salt Lake City, till we came here."

"What's happened to the ranch?"

"It's closed. It didn't pay any more, and Mom hadn't the heart to go on with it. I was at the Lazy Y for a visit, and Mrs. Ackland was staying there for a divorce, and she heard us sing one night and—that's how I got this job. And Mrs. Ackland never got the divorce after all!"

"I see," he said contentedly, though none of it made sense to him yet, and he didn't care, so long as he could go on looking at her.

"When did you get back, Jamie? Do you realize I haven't had a letter from you in about two years?"

Anybody can read what's on a postcard," she added illogically, as an afterthought.

"Now, wait a minute—two years," he said thoughtfully. "I may have slacked off a little lately, but I'm no such heel as that. Anyway, I wrote you from Rome, just before we sailed in July."

"A postcard! I got it at the Lazy Y. Forwarded."

"I wrote a letter, telling you what I thought was going to happen when we got back."

"It's probably still in your pocket!"

"It's probably still at Reno! I bet if we went to Bar X now and looked in the mail-box we'd find a lot of my letters there, gone sere and yellow and gnawed by boll-weevils, like something out of one of Barrie's plays!"

"We don't have boll-weevils in Nevada," said Sierra, seizing as always upon the essential point.

"That's right," he said, and stifled an impulse to laughter. "That's down South, isn't it. I'm forgetting my geography." For a long moment they sat looking at each other, without defenses, as children can. "Hullo," he said softly, then. "Did you miss me much?"

"Oh, James, sometimes I thought I'd die!"

"I know," he nodded. "And losing all those letters didn't help. Now that we're safe after all, don't let's let it ever happen again, will we."

"No, Jamie. But I—"

"We both knew it would be like this, of course—when we came together again. No strangeness—no sense of time—just James and Sierra, picking up where

they left off. It will always be that way, for us. But don't let's take anything for granted, now. Don't let's run any more risks. You write to me. I'll write to you. Regularly."

"I'll try. But your letters are wonderful, like something out of a book, and—I'm not very good at it. I can't even spell, you said so yourself."

"Think I mind that?"

She grinned at him in sudden shyness.

"When I read Elizabeth Browning's letters to Robert," she confessed, "I thought I knew why you had stopped writing to me. Mine were so dull."

"I hope you didn't compare mine to Robert's!" he grinned.

"I like yours better," she assured him simply.

"I consider that a real compliment," he said after a moment during which he again strangled the laughter in his own throat. "I'll try to live up to that from now on."

"I'm not—not so ignorant as I was, Jamie," she informed him diffidently. "I read quite a lot in Salt Lake City, from the library. Maybe you won't have to be so tactful now, about what I don't know."

"What did you read?" he queried, less from a desire to know than a wish to keep her talking, her face uplifted so trustfully to his, her eyes so unfaltering, her lips so near.

"Well, I read Jane Austen—and Kipling—and Shaw, but he's a show-off—and Oscar Wilde, only I never did understand why they put him in jail, and—What are you laughing at?"

"It's only because I'm so happy," he apologized. "Can't I grin about that if I want to?"

"James."

"Mm-hm?"

"You won't—get mad at me?"

"I shouldn't think so. What's on your mind?"

"James, I—p'raps I ought to say something."

"Now, don't tell me you've fallen for one of those cowboys at the Garden!" he said, knowing so well that she hadn't.

She shook her head quite seriously.

"No. It's not me. But I was thinking—maybe you saw somebody while you were away—that you could like better than me."

"Where would I be likely to do that?" he queried gently.

"Well—maybe in Paris?"

"I haven't been in Paris since I was sixteen. Look here, have you got a jealous disposition, or something?"

"Well, I didn't want you to feel—" It died away.

"Honor bound," he suggested gravely, watching her. "I don't. I happen to like it this way."

"I guess I'd better just shut up and be glad you've come back to me," she sighed comfortably.

"I said I'd come back," he reminded her. "When I got to New York last July all I wanted in the world was to hop a train for Reno. But my allowance doesn't include traveling expenses. And I was pretty busy getting myself into Princeton. That's a college they have over in Jersey."

"I've heard of Princeton," said Sierra intelligently.

"Also I've been trying to find a job for next summer that might lead to something after I graduate. When I get one, we're all set."

"What kind of job?"

"Head work. Maybe I'll get a chance at something in a newspaper office."

"*Writing?*"

"Mm-hm. I'm trying to write a book, too."

She gazed at him with awe. It was all very well to *read* books, but people who wrote them must be some sort of god.

"Jamie, that's wonderful!"

"Well—we'll see."

Now was the time for Sierra to speak of the film contract, but somehow she lacked the courage. Mentioned next to writing a book, it seemed so *easy*. All she did was stand up and sing. That didn't take brains.

"Whatever I do," she said sadly, "you'll always be ahead of me. However much I learn, I'll never know as much as you do."

"You can play the concertina," he consoled her.

"You said that once before, when you were trying not to hurt my feelings."

"You're earning money with it, aren't you?"

"Y-yes." Now was the time to offer him her salary as a film star, to use as he saw fit. But the words would not come. It seemed such a cheeky thing to do, to a man who wrote books.

"Yes," he echoed dryly. "Well, that's more than I'm doing yet. But you wait. Some day we'll open up the

ranch again—and maybe next time we can make it pay.”

“The Lazy Y pays.”

“We’ll have to find out how they work that.”

“It’s got five bathrooms.”

“I expect that helps. When I’ve written a best-seller we’ll put five bathrooms into Bar X. Are you cold? Let’s walk awhile.”

They walked for more than an hour, up and down the paths in the Park—unseeing, tireless, absorbed in each other, their talk a jumble of reminiscence and rambling narrative of the years between. He learned of David’s demise with regret, and listened to the life story of Jake. Pop’s best witticisms over a period of years were trotted out and proved quite convulsing. She heard with reverence his casual accounts of places he had been and people who had been nice to him and things he had seen, and she became increasingly conscious of the gulf of experience between them, marveling more and more that he had ever dreamed of returning to her from all his bright adventures—but perceiving nevertheless that to James the return was the adventure, and all the rest mere common-placeness. And finally—

“Are you hungry?” he said in sudden solicitude. “Let’s find a place to eat.”

They drifted into one of those restaurants with checked gingham tablecloths and high-backed settles shutting off each table from its neighbors. James prepared to consult her minutely as to what she wanted to eat—his mother always makes quite a thing of choos-

ing her food—and besides, it seemed to him important that Sierra should have the very best there was, and there must be things she would especially like if only he knew what they were, and besides that, it was their first grown-up meal together, and—

He had no chance, however, to develop this tender theme. Sierra closed the menu without even looking at it, and laid it down.

"I'll just have whatever you do," she said, and put her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands and let her eyes rest on him full of the respect with which she would regard a spectacular sunset or a mountain peak clad in perpetual snow, but considerably more affection.

After studying the card in his hand, James ordered Scotch broth, lamb chops, green peas and mashed potatoes, and chocolate ice cream.

"For two?" asked the waitress.

"Is that—will that be all right?" James inquired anxiously. His mother would have hated it.

Sierra nodded, and the waitress went away.

In the illusion of privacy created by the settles, they looked at each other silently again for a long moment, and James was the first to shift his gaze. It fell to the silverware on the table beneath his hand.

"You know, if ever you look at anybody but me like that," he said, "goodness only knows what will happen to you."

"But I'll never love anybody but you enough to look at them like that!" she said at once.

It was the first time the word had been spoken between them. She made no effort to retract it.

His startled upward glance found her eyes waiting, steady and unembarrassed. There was suddenly a lump in his throat, choking him, while his heart dissolved within him at her simplicity. He realized a sort of pity for her too, and a sort of terror, just as he had done in the old days when he carried the bubble between his jealous hands. Her defenselessness was still so much greater than that of any female thing he had ever seen, and James had been brought up to believe that all women were fragile and helpless and not very bright. Sierra was wide open to whatever some lug tried to do to her. Of course with him it was all right, but apparently after today he would never dare let her out of his sight again—

"You mustn't say things like that to people," he told her almost sharply, out of his private panic.

Sierra stared at him.

"But, Jamie, I only said it to *you*!"

"It's all right with me, you can always say anything you like to me, but—be careful, that's all!"

"You're just the way you used to be, aren't you?"

"How was that?"

"Well—*cautious*. Why, the very first time I ever saw you, you thought I was going to give you a horse that bucked, remember?"

"Mm-hm."

"Well, he didn't buck, did he?"

"Nope."

"Why are you that way, Jamie? Why don't you trust people more?"

"Well, now that you've asked me right out, like that, I'll tell you exactly how it happened." The habitual gentle melancholy of his long face did not alter perceptibly, but the curving lashes veiled his eyes as he pushed the salt cellar an inch to the left with the tip of his butter-knife, and began to maneuver the pepper into position beside it. "When I was a baby—mind you, this was quite a long time ago—when I was a baby, I had a nurse who had a very warped sense of humor. You see, I may as well confess at once that I was weaned very young—in fact, I was much too young, I just couldn't get the idea at all—though I was a very precocious child in other and perhaps more important ways. Well, this nurse I was telling you about used to bring me my bottle every few hours according to the time-table we had agreed on, and every time she brought it—" A teaspoon balanced expertly amidships was laid as a bridge from the pepper to the salt, absorbing for the moment his whole attention. "—every time she brought me that bottle she used to play a gruesome sort of game. Don't forget, I was still flat on my back with no chance to paste her one on the—nose. She'd come at me on tiptoe with the bottle poised, you see, as though she was going to hand it over and leave me to it—I knew what to do with it once I got my hands on it. But just as I'd get ready to grab for it, she'd jerk it out of my reach with a shriek of girlish laughter. Then down it would come again, closer and closer—and whoops,

it was gone again, leaving me just where I was before. This would go on and on. I must say I usually got it in the end, but by that time I was too exhausted to care, and dropped off to sleep with the rubber nipple drooling down my neck. Well—that's how I got my suspicious nature," he finished rather lamely, as Sierra only sat there looking at him with large, attentive, adoring eyes.

"Jamie, I don't believe a word of all that, you're just telling a story!"

"You're pretty quick, aren't you," he said admiringly, and his sudden, spreading grin shed its radiance upon her as the waitress set the soup before them.

James's parable was perhaps more poignant than he knew, for even without the fanciful nursemaid he has been both stood up and slapped down by the life which he endures in his mother's company. She is not a wicked woman, but she is shallow and thoughtless, and gay in a determined sort of way which can have a very depressing effect on other people. In his eighteen years of somewhat scattered living, James has seen many desirable things figuratively dangled almost within his reach and then whisked away with heartless laughter, and the greatest of these was Sierra herself. As a consequence, he has acquired caution as a sort of armor, and wariness as a shield, and he wears his self-contained melancholy like a mask, with only his eyes to betray him, blue fire behind their defensive lashes.

He was born shy, and his sensibilities have been persistently danced on all his life by his mother. He has

nothing of his own that he cannot hide. So he has practiced hiding his thoughts, and by now he is getting pretty good at it. He has a long head and a long chin, and his mother has remarked more than once that he looks like a very kind, rather intelligent horse. This is unjust, but it sticks in the minds of her hearers so that the next time they look at James they think of it again. One of the nicest things about him is his voice, which is soft and slow and without italics, and lends a disarming diffidence to everything he says.

James at eighteen has very few illusions about life, but he lost most of them so long ago he doesn't even miss them any more. He still has Sierra, though. He gazed at her across the table with a sort of possessive humility which would have wrung tears of gratitude from a more experienced female person. To Sierra it was merely the way James ought to look, and she took it for granted instead of getting down on her marrow-bones and thanking God that James has gone on obstinately being James instead of turning into something rather nasty, as he has had ample opportunity to do.

James was ashamed of himself, and his outrageous story. He had taken advantage of her divine lack of sophistication. He hadn't set out to, but there it was. She had almost believed him. It was like stealing the blind man's pennies, to tease Sierra.

"I'm sorry, darling, I was playing the fool," he said contritely. "Hereafter, you just ignore me when I start that."

Sierra's spoon had paused in mid-air.

"Oh, Jamie, say it again!" she whispered.

"Say what again?"

"What you called me then."

"Darling," he repeated, without stress. "Doesn't anybody call you that in Salt Lake City?"

"No."

In spite of him, for it was too quick for him, his left eyebrow went off at a skeptical angle.

"Not even your mother?"

"No."

"That's funny," said James, trying to throw his mind back to Nevada customs. "Didn't the Indians have a word for it?"

"Well, I don't know about that," said Sierra seriously, and frowned. "But I expect Pop could tell you, he used to know some Indians quite well. He—"

"All right," James interrupted gently. "All right, we'll let that one go."

He finished his soup in silence, fighting an impulse to almost hysterical mirth, and another impulse to catch her up in his arms, *now*, and run—for fear he lost her again, for fear she would change, for fear something would hurt her, for fear—

"James, have I said something wrong?"

"No, of course not. How do you mean, wrong?"

"I'm so ignorant," she sighed. "I try and try—but it's just the same. I was feeling sort of puffed up about myself with all that reading, till now, but—I guess I didn't learn so much as I thought I did."

"Who cares?"

"I do. I wanted you to be proud of me when you got back."

He looked at her helplessly across the table—at the clear, brilliant eyes, and the flawless skin, the perfect teeth, and the aura of magnetic health which shone round her. He laid his hand, palm up, on the table half way between them.

"Gimme," he said softly, and hers crept into it. "Sierra, look—would it make you feel any better if I told you you are the most beautiful thing I ever saw?"

"But you've seen—" She groped for lucid argument against such preposterous overstatement. "You must have seen duchesses and—and great actresses, and—wonderful paintings, and—"

"I've seen Mona Lisa," he answered, very low, "and Paris in the spring, and the Queen of England, and Salisbury Cathedral at sunset, and the Winged Victory—but they're none of them as beautiful as you are. Nor I couldn't ever love them as much."

The waitress arrived with the lamb chops.

Their hands didn't leap apart self-consciously as the plates came down on the table. They made room politely, and smiled confiding, happy smiles up into the waitress's face, and she smiled back and thought what nice kids they were, and returned to the kitchen humming a tune to herself.

"Well," said James philosophically, "now she knows all about it. You know, I like this." He glanced round with approval at the restaurant, as much of it as he could see for the settles. "This feels swell. Only—after

I get that job we could have dinner at home sometimes—couldn't we?"

"Yes, Jamie."

"You are going to marry me, aren't you? I mean—that's the general idea, isn't it?"

"Yes, Jamie."

"Just like that?"

She looked puzzled.

"Well, after all, I suppose you couldn't very well say 'This is so sudden,' could you," he reflected.

"I expect I ought to say 'Thank you,' though," she admitted gravely.

"Yes, I think you ought," he agreed without a flicker.

"Thank you, Jamie."

"Don't mention it."

This time they both laughed together, but with perhaps not quite the same appreciation of the joke. James's tendency towards hysterics was slowly simmering down into a permanent internal grin with a great deal of tenderness in it. He realized that he would never be able to anticipate what Sierra might say to him, or how she would react to his most obvious sallies, and the prospect filled him with bliss. He realized too that she hadn't once said, "Do tell me about your book."

He laid down his knife and fork, detached the small gold pin from his waistcoat, and held it out to her in the palm of his hand.

"What's that?" asked Sierra, making no move to take it.

"My club pin."

"You mean—a fraternity pin?" she asked incredulously, for she had heard of fraternity pins.

"At Princeton we call them clubs. It's the same thing."

Sierra only sat looking down at it with round, serious eyes, and at the hand which held it—a thin hand, very long in the fingers.

"Don't you want it?" said his voice from across the table.

"Oh—oh, yes, of course I do!"

"Well, then—Sierra, are you going to cry?"

She shook her head, and bit her under lip savagely.

"Some day I'll get you a ring," he promised. "After I get the job."

Sierra never could bear humility from him. Humility was hers, the debt she owed him for being kind to her, for putting up with her stupidity, for not laughing at her when she didn't know what he was talking about—for loving her.

"Do you remember," she began with quivering lips, "the day you gave me your watch?"

"Perfectly. Only they can't take this away from you."

"And you said—'Some day I'll get you a better one.'"

"I will, too."

"Jamie—when will you learn that whatever you give me is what I want—because there just isn't anything any better?"

For a moment he sat very still, looking up at her from under his eyebrows, the pin still in his open palm on the table between them. At last he contrived to speak.

"I think," he said with visible effort, "that is probably the nicest thing anybody has ever said to me—so far."

Sierra took the pin reverently and fastened it to the front of her blue silk blouse, while he sat motionless, watching. The waitress came to take away the lamb chops, and hovered uncertainly in the offing. James roused himself.

"Have you finished with that stuff on your plate?"

Sierra nodded, absorbed in the pin, and James nodded to the waitress. The plates went.

"What time is it?" asked Sierra vaguely. "I've got to keep track of the time. I have to go to the hotel and change, you know."

"We're all right. It isn't far. Well, tell me, Miss Nevada, how does it feel to be earning real money by the sweat of your brow? Were you nervous the first night?"

"No, of course not. It's just singing," said Sierra.

"Just singing. I see." Mirth surged within him again.

"Jamie, I should have asked you—you don't mind about my using that name? I mean—you said it first, that day on the river-bank. And then Mr. Ackland, that's my manager, he thought of the same thing himself—he and his wife. And then Saul froze on to it, and I couldn't make them give it up. But I didn't want

you to think I—well, it was *your* name for me, and I meant to keep it kind of private, but—”

“I guess it wasn’t a very difficult thing to think up,” he grinned. “Why should I mind? You’ve done credit to it, I should say. But look, Sierra—you aren’t going on with that kind of thing, are you?”

She hesitated, while the magnitude of her commitment to just that sort of thing rolled over her consciousness. For a while she had forgotten the film contract. Perhaps he wasn’t going to like it.

“Well, I—” she faltered, wondering how to tell him. After all this talk about his getting a job, it might sound almost like bragging if she said she already had one.

“No, don’t,” he went on earnestly. “Don’t get stage-struck, Sierra, just on account of this rodeo stunt. You’ve got away with it, and maybe it’s been a lot of fun. But it’s no life for a girl like you, Sierra.”

“But I—”

The waitress set the ice cream in front of them.

“Coffee now or later?” she inquired.

“Later,” said James. “Sierra, I know I’m in no position now to dictate to you, when you’re probably making more on this trip than I’ll get for a year’s work on the newspaper. But don’t fall for it, that’s all. You don’t belong in show business, it’s not your line, honest it isn’t.”

Sierra saw calamity closing in on her.

“But if you can’t earn anything till next summer, on account of Princeton, and I can—”

“That’s right,” said James. “Rub it in.”

"Oh, but I didn't mean it that way! Please, James, I only meant—"

"I know you didn't mean it that way," he interrupted very quietly, and something in his face held her silent now, watching him with apprehension. "I shouldn't have said that—about rubbing it in. You must realize that this rodeo stunt of yours is pretty hard for me to take. Here I am, still in school, with my hands tied, and you're already earning your own living. I'd leave Princeton tomorrow, only the degree is supposed to help me to get a better job than I could get without it."

"Yes, of course it will. You mustn't think of leaving without your degree. Besides, I'll save all my money, and then we can get married without waiting till you get a job."

"That would be just dandy," said James.

"Then it's all right?" she queried more hopefully.

"You don't know much about men, do you?"

"We-ell, I—"

"A man has funny ideas, Sierra. Apparently you don't know that a man likes to earn his own money, especially when he's getting married. If his wife happens to—want to pick up something extra that's O.K., but—not to pay the rent with, and the butcher and the cook. A man who lives on his wife's money is likely to be called by a very short and ugly name. Didn't you know that?"

Sierra shook her head mutely, waiting for calamity to pounce.

"Well, you know now," he told her gently. "You see, this is what happens because I'm unlucky enough to be a month younger than you are, instead of several years older. I got in as a Junior, over there in Jersey, with a little luck. I'm out in '31, with a little more luck. But it may take me awhile to get started after that. D'ya mind waiting?"

Again Sierra shook her head in silence, and James noticed that she looked sort of scared about something.

"I don't know how long it may be," he went on as sanely as possible. "But I'd hate to think you were going to spend the time knocking around Broadway singing for your dinner."

"It's Hollywood," said Sierra faintly.

James laid down his spoon.

"Now, look, Sierra—I don't know what they may have told you over at the Garden, but don't you believe any of this Hollywood stuff. Hundreds of girls go to Hollywood every year—for what? They end up waiting on tables for ten dollars a week and tips. I know you're beautiful—believe me, I know it! But, Sierra, Hollywood is a mug's game, it's not for you, it's nothing but a racket, and a tough one."

"But—sound is coming in," she argued timidly. "Mr. Ackland says that Jolson film revolutionized the whole industry. They're going to do more musical shows, with the music right on the screen. They want girls who can sing, and—"

"I know, and you've got a cute voice and they've told you there's a fortune in it," he agreed patiently.

"So what happens? You take this money you've earned here and go to Hollywood and try to beat the game out there. And after a few weeks or months your money's gone and where are you? A long way from home!"

"But I wouldn't have to—"

"Besides," he added, clinching it, "I'd hate to marry a film star."

She stared at him, feeling very sick inside. Her lips opened, but no sound came. James was alarmed.

"Sierra, what's the matter? Don't you feel well?"

"Oh, James, I didn't know you'd feel this way about it! You see, until today I didn't even know you were in America! Honest, I'd never have done it if I hadn't thought you'd be pleased, I—I guess I thought I could make you proud of me that way, since I hadn't any brains the way you have—"

"What are you talking about?"

"I signed a movie contract yesterday."

Everything about James went cold, including his eyes and the pit of his stomach.

"*You what?*"

"Mom and I both signed it, and Mr. Ackland too. With Super Films. Mom cashed the check this morning. We're supposed to take the midnight train west, and I go straight to work on tests next week."

"Well," said James oddly, "that's that."

"I don't guess I can get out of it now," she pleaded. "I'm going to get two hundred dollars a week, and more if my first picture is a success, and I thought—"

"Two hundred—" Visibly, James pulled himself together. "Why, that's fine," he said cordially. "Congratulations."

Sierra waited, wearing her puzzled look.

"You're angry with me," she said in a groping sort of way.

"Oh, no, I'm delighted," he assured her politely. "It's very—unusual to have dinner with a girl who has a signed movie contract under her belt."

"Mom's got it at the hotel," said Sierra.

James signaled to the waitress for the bill.

"No coffee?"

"No coffee," said James, and paid the bill, with an ample tip. "We should have had champagne," he said when the waitress had gone. "But you didn't tell me the good news in time."

"James, *don't!*" she cried out on the point of tears, and her bewilderment was a pitiful thing to see, but James was blind, blind and blundering for once in his own black misery.

"I'm sorry there won't be time for coffee," he remarked punctiliously. "But I think we'd better be getting back now."

He rose, and Sierra got up obediently and walked with him through the restaurant door and up to a taxi at the curb. As they crossed the sidewalk a newsboy dodged past them, yelling something about Wall Street and a suicide. James helped her into the cab, told the driver where to go, and stepped in himself and banged the door.

They rode to the first red light in silence. Then as the cab stopped, James turned swiftly and gathered her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry about—the whole thing. You mustn't cry, it makes wrinkles. Sierra, darling—don't cry."

She sniffed gratefully into his coat, and he held her closer, his cheek against her wet one.

"Then you won't let it make any difference after all?" she queried hopefully.

"Oh, yes, it makes a difference," said James. "You're on your way. It will take me years to get as far."

"Promise you'll write to me anyhow!"

"Yes," he promised, holding her. "I'll write to you. Fan letters."

"Maybe I won't be any good out there," she offered after a minute, still hopefully.

"You'll be good," said James. And as the cab drew up in front of the hotel he set his hand under her chin and kissed her briefly. "That's good-by again," he said, and opened the door and handed her out.

As he did so another newsboy charged into them, yelling something about panic in the stock market.

Pop was waiting for them outside the door.

"Well, I see you made it all right," he said, rallying round.

"Yes," said James gravely. "We made it all right." He held out his hand to Pop and smiled down at the old cowboy. "So long, Pop, if I don't see you again."

"So long, James. Till next time, anyway."

"Write to me, Jamie—you promised!" entreated

Sierra, with a long backward look, as Pop drew her away towards the entrance, his hand under her arm.

Oh, dear, oh, dear, mourned Asmilius, while James stood beside the ticking cab and watched her go. *He would have to take it like that! You hang on to things your end, I'll hoick him out there as soon as I can.*

September 4, 1931.—Nobody pretends that Sierra is a great actress, of course. But in the midst of a Depression, Sierra is a success.

She has naturalness and magnetism and beauty—and a lovely voice that records well. She does as she is told, without making scenes in the Front Office. She never gets into escapades that have to be suppressed, nor has love affairs which cause inter-studio complications. She has no delusions of grandeur, and no tactless inferiority complex. Press agents, directors, and leading-men find her almost too good to be true. And she photographs like the well-known million dollars.

Donna's good sense has kept everything very unpretentious. They took a smallish house with one Negro maid to look after them, and Sierra wasn't seen about much on the Boulevard. It suited the studio to depict her as a home-loving girl from the open spaces, and they made a great thing of her having no swimming-pool. The Acklands moved to California and opened an office there, mainly to supervise Sierra. She brought them luck, they said—and they saw to it that the studio didn't pluck her eyebrows nor issue portrait stills of her in lace negligees or bathing-suits. Figures

are coming in again, and she has been allowed to keep her young curves as they are, without dieting. She has changed very little, to everyone's credit.

Her salary has climbed with each release lately. Her supporting casts grow stronger. Her leading-men are being taken from the upper brackets. She has begun, rather gingerly, to savor the more glamorous side of Hollywood. She goes out dancing, and her name is linked romantically with each of her escorts in turn. She goes to *premières* wearing white fox. People make love to her. People even propose marriage to her. And because these tangible evidences of success are all she has words to express, she writes it all down for James and lays it at his feet—so that he can be proud of her, and possibly forgive her, somehow, for coming to Hollywood.

Sierra as usual is being a fool about letters. She has no idea how to tell him that the knowledge of him dwells with her twenty-four hours a day, sometimes as a dull sort of ache, sometimes as a comforting sort of backstop, and sometimes—especially in bed, after a hard day under the lights—as a sharp, almost unbearable awareness. To write down simply, in words of one syllable, that she will love him till she dies is for some fantastic reason impossible to her. It would be so easy to set down some such thing as: Last night I came home late from a party, and there was nobody there to compare with you, and I was bored, and frightened too, and I got into bed and cried and cried because I don't know how to live until I can see you again. So very easy. Nothing in it that even Sierra can't spell.

And it would make such a difference to James. But no. She has thought it. The words were in her mind, I saw to that. But she shrinks from writing it down as she would shrink from nakedness, and hides behind a painstaking chronicle of her studio days and social evenings which automatically reads like a heartless saga of success.

And James meanwhile, whose uninhibited fountain-pen is full of a love that is very nearly lyric—there is no doubt that the boy will be capable one day of real literature—James confines himself to brief notes in which he says he is very glad to hear, etc., etc., and how does she feel about, etc., etc., and as for himself, things wag along about as usual, etc., etc. And then sometimes at the very end comes a paragraph that Sierra reads again and again till her hands are shaking and she wants to cry and sing and dance and cry again, because for just a few minutes James forgot himself and wrote, in his own inimitable way and with his own infinite variety, that he loved her, no matter what. One suspects that a great deal more of this kind of thing goes down on paper and is torn up. But sometimes he is tired, or in a hurry, or merely reckless, and then it comes to her.

James is trying to be careful, with all this success about. The Crash took most of his mother's income, and she is bewildered and unhappy and unable to comprehend that she mustn't buy her clothes at Bergdorf Goodman any more, and that she can't just go on writing checks without subtracting each time from the

stub opposite. She has been bad at figures for so long and got away with it, that any effort now to make her responsible only reduces her to tears of rage and bafflement.

All this James has conveyed in his letters to Sierra very sympathetically and, as it were, with a poker face, but one can sense—if one is not Sierra—the utter hopelessness he feels. His mother will never allow herself to become a competent woman. She will sit there for the rest of her life, waiting for him to explain things she doesn't want to understand, to ease the shock of things she doesn't want to hear, and to tell her lovingly that she mustn't worry and everything will be all right. It is not a cheerful outlook for James.

Sierra, who never had to think much about money on the ranch, and who at this rate will never have to think much about money in Hollywood, has not realized the Depression at all. James finds himself pitchforked into a world where men sell apples on the street corners, and where former friends of his mother's who used to stay at the Ritz are living in one room on the West Side and thankful to have it.

James comprehends what he is up against. He spent his 1930 summer vacation working in a garage. When he didn't return to Princeton the following autumn, it never occurred to Sierra that he couldn't afford it. She accepted at its face value his nonchalant explanation that he wasn't going to graduate after all, because he had unexpectedly got that job on a newspaper. In fact it raised her spirits considerably. James was earn-

ing money too. Perhaps they wouldn't have to wait so long, after all. . . .

* * *

April 20, 1933—She's had it all now—even the Grauman première and her footprints in wet cement. All she lacks is the Academy Award. And James.

Oh, yes, we've lost James again, somehow. It looked pretty safe for a while. They did keep in touch. But gradually during the past year, and I think deliberately, James has tapered off.

I can see, if Sierra couldn't, what it must have meant to him to receive those meticulous, shameless inventories of Sierra's progress, while he lived in a furnished room on hamburgers and malted milks. James had nothing much to record but his unfaltering, obstinate love and his precarious foothold on the lowest rung of the journalistic ladder, doing the cast-off odd jobs on a New York evening paper—crumbs thrown to him only by reason of an airy sort of blackmail practiced by his mother on a man somewhere in an upstairs office of the paper.

I thought once we were all right again—Donna died during the past winter, and James saw the paragraph in the paper, thanks to Asmilius' pointing finger, no doubt. It was James's cue, of course. But he still hasn't got traveling expenses, and even if he had, his mental picture of Sierra's life here is so far out of drawing that he would never have contemplated taking a step in her direction yet.

Sierra thought of writing to him, of course, because

she always wants him more acutely when things go wrong. But she laid down the pen again before she had written his name. What was the use? He hadn't got the letter when her father died. And what was the use of writing to James anyway, when all you got back nowadays was one page, done on a typewriter, in which he told nothing of himself and never, never mentioned love any more? Sierra has been trying to convince herself that there is somebody else for James to love now—the Society Editor, probably—for Sierra has seen all the films about newspaper offices that have ever been made, studying them intently in an effort to block in James's background and surroundings. In newspaper films there is always a smart girl reporter who would know what a Princeton man was talking about.

Instead of James, therefore, it was Philip Jervis who stood by through everything at the time of Donna's death, very attentive and tender and considerate. I've nothing against Philip, really, apart from the fact that he isn't James. Philip is a very decent sort of person, and a very successful leading-man. He has a round, boyish head and wears boyish sports clothes, a little on the loud side. He is gay and charming and handsome and not very deep. He doesn't drink much, he's wonderful at games, he's good to his mother, and sends her large, useless checks on her birthdays and at Christmas time, when all she really wants is as much as a lace handkerchief which he has taken the trouble to choose for her himself. Philip lives from his skin out, and uses his heart to regulate his excellent circulation. He is one of Hollywood's few eligible bachelors.

James wrote to Sierra about her mother, though, and not on a typewriter—a simple and touching letter, which arrived among a lot of other condolences and was duly opened by the secretary and presented with the rest in a deep pile on Sierra's desk on the morning after the funeral. James's letter lay fifth from the top. (It was a new secretary, who had never heard of him, and so she made no exception of his neatly written page.)

When Sierra had finished breakfast that morning she sat down with a sigh to the task of reading over and over again how wonderful her mother was, and how deeply grieved everybody was to learn of her death. Sierra had reached a point emotionally where she simply didn't care who else was grieved about her mother's death. The house was so empty of Donna, so bare of her quiet, smiling presence, that Sierra was inclined to drift from room to room as though hoping that one of them might seem less bleak than another, might have retained some small remnants of the warmth and comfort that had always existed wherever Donna was.

Mrs. Ackland was staying in the guest-room these days, in a tactful effort to fill ever so little Sierra's need of someone to come home to, someone to eat meals with, someone to speak to of the small, ordinary daily things which are all one can bear to talk about at such times. Sierra was grateful. But it was through Mrs. Ackland's kind and watchful conniving with the devoted secretary that James's letter went the way of all the rest when Sierra needed it so much.

Just as Sierra had finished the top letter on that tragic pile and laid it aside, Philip Jarvis drove up in his cream-colored roadster, and entered the room to announce briskly that it was a fine, warm day and he thought a drive up through the hills was the only sensible thing to do, and be sure to bring a sweater.

Mrs. Ackland agreed with him instantly.

"I'll see to these," she said competently, laying a hand on the pile of letters in front of Sierra. "You can't read any more of that kind of thing now. Miss Evans can do the whole lot while you're out with Philip. I'll have her send each of them a line to say how you appreciate their sympathy and will write later when you have a little recovered from the shock. You run along with Philip, now, and breathe some air that doesn't smell of lilies. No, I'm not being heartless, Sierra, you can only stand about so much, and funerals are a relic of barbarism even worse than weddings—tear you to bits by being so beautiful when you're on the edge of things anyway. Take her away, Philip. It's time I put my foot down."

A maid brought the sweater from upstairs, and Sierra followed Philip listlessly out to the car.

And that's how it happened that a brief typewritten acknowledgment beginning "Miss Nevada wishes me to say—" and signed with a rubber stamp and initials was sent off to James in reply to his letter.

Several days later Sierra took herself in hand and began to work methodically down the pile of condolences, which had grown considerably by then. At last, with a little cry, she came to the page in James's hand-

writing. The secretary, who was folding and sealing and stamping replies, and hovering generally, was much annoyed to see that somebody had written something to start Miss Nevada crying all over again.

"When did this one come?" demanded Sierra then, rounding on the astonished young woman angrily with tears hanging on her cheeks. "Why didn't you give it to me at once? It was the one letter in the world I needed to have, and you go and *hide* it from me!"

"I didn't know it was any different from the others," said Miss Evans in her own defense. "It wasn't marked PERSONAL, and I didn't know whom it was from, I just—"

"It's from *Jamie!*" sobbed Sierra, quite beside herself. "Can't you see it's from Jamie, with his name at the bottom? Whenever anything comes from him you're supposed to give it to me at once, no matter what I'm doing or where I am—the minute it comes, do you hear?—and you're *not* supposed to open it first!"

"I'm very sorry," said Miss Evans a little stiffly. "This is the first time I've heard of anyone called Jamie. I had no idea—Mrs. Ackland said—"

"I suppose you even *answered* it!" howled Sierra distractedly, and couldn't find her handkerchief.

"Why, yes, of course—just like all the others. I said—"

"Don't tell me what you said, I can just imagine—and God only *knows* what he'll think of me now! *You*, answering Jamie's letter about my m-mother—!"

She was gone from the room, James's letter in her hand.

At the writing-table in her bedroom Sierra labored alone over the letter which must be written to James. The first attempt was so spotted with tears that she was ashamed and tore it up and began again. What James finally received read as follows:

DEAR JAMIE—

It was very nice of you to write me about Mom, and I want to explain why you didn't hear from me sooner. It's been quite a long time since I have had a letter from you, and in the meanwhile my secretary—the one who knew your handwriting and never opened them—she got married and left, and I have a new secretary now. So when your letter came with a lot of others and you had forgotten to mark it PERSONAL, she opened it and answered it along with the rest and never knew the difference till this morning when I thought I'd better look through all the messages from people at last, because if I can't bear it now I never can, and so I found your letter. Of course I blew poor Miss Evans sky-high, and she said, How could she know, she'd never heard of anybody named Jamie, and it wasn't marked PERSONAL, and of course there wasn't any answer to that, and I felt kind of flat. So that's how it happened.

But I am very grateful to you for writing, all the same. It was very sudden about Mom, but everybody says that's the best way, and the Doctor *promised* me she didn't suffer. Everyone here has been very kind,

I don't know what I would have done without Robbie and Lorna Ackland, they took charge of everything and it was a beautiful funeral, the only other one I ever saw was Dad's, and of course I never dreamed of anything like the flowers she had.

The Acklands thought it would be best for me to go right on working, so I won't have time to brood, and I expect they're right. I am making a very interesting picture this time, it's called "Western Skies," and I both ride and sing in it. The one we did before where I didn't sing at all proved not to be such a good idea. I guess I am not so good at acting as I am at singing. My leading-man in this one is Philip Jervis, maybe you have seen him, he is very amusing and makes me laugh, which is a relief. He isn't a cowboy actor, he plays the tenderfoot that almost gets hanged by mistake. Mom liked him, and he says he misses her almost as much as I do. Mrs. Ackland is going to stay here in the house with me for a while, which I think is very kind of her, to keep me from being too miserable, she says, and Mr. Ackland drops in—I expect mostly to see her—almost every evening.

Well, as I said before, it was wonderful to hear from you again, I thought you had forgotten me for sure. I hope I will get another letter from you soon to say you forgive me for the mix-up this end. I wouldn't have had it happen for worlds.

Always your loving,

SIERRA

P.S. When you write next time please tell me what you are doing.

Well, you see how it is. No faintest glimmer of what she really feels gets down on the paper. But surely James can see through that to her need of him. Surely some of the sincerity and beauty and earnestness that is Sierra reaches him. Or does it only infuriate him, as a born writer himself, that anyone, however much adored, can be so clumsy with a pen? I wish I knew.

It is hard to tell much by his reply—typewritten, and marked **PERSONAL** in red ink—which I confess is about as enigmatical to me as it is to Sierra, who is as usual a lap or so behind him. James wrote:

DEAR SIERRA—

Thanks for your letter. No need to apologize. As I have not yet reached the place where my mail has to be marked **PERSONAL** in order to protect it from a secretarial corps, I suppose it was only natural for me to overlook such precautions in the stress of the moment when I wrote to you last.

I consider it very sensible of you to occupy your mind with your careers these days, and thus avoid any tendency towards introspection, which might be construed as brooding. Anyone who succumbs to the temptation to try to think things out at a time like this runs a terrific risk of meeting himself face to face, and that can be very frightening. If you know what I mean.

As for what I am doing, I am still known (by courtesy) as a newspaperman, and to my intense surprise I have been selling a few pieces on the side. No sign of the Pulitzer Prize so far.

Of course I see all your pictures as fast as they come out, and compose fan letters all the way home which never get written. Some day I will write one, though. Like this. Dear Miss Nevada, I thought you were simply wonderful in your last picture and I can't seem to get you out of my mind. I enclose twenty-five (25) cents in stamps, and may I please have an autographed picture of you to put in a silver frame on my bureau? Yours very truly, etc. Your staff will then function with its customary efficiency, the picture will arrive, will be put into an imitation leather frame from Woolworth's, and will thenceforth adorn my aforesaid bureau. And many years from now, when I am an elderly nervous wreck still living in a hall bedroom and writing a still unfinished epic, the bright young man from across the passage (who reminds me of myself when I was a youth with all the world before me) the bright young man, I say, will look in at the door one night and say: "I just can't stand it any longer, grandpa, I've got to know who is the beautiful young lady in the imitation leather picture-frame on your bureau?" And I will shake my graying locks (which will need cutting by then) and mumble in my long white beard, and say: "Aha, my boy, you may well ask. They don't come like that young lady any more." And then, if he doesn't get out of there very quickly, he will have to listen while I tell in painful detail (having had just a drop too much of the medicinal whiskey which I keep handy under the bed) painful detail how I loved the young lady in the picture-frame—how desperately,

and humbly, and world-without-end, how bitterly and savagely and hopelessly I loved her, and how I lived a long dark agony of wanting to cherish and protect her—when I was twelve.

Yours,

JAMIE

Sierra as usual was both confused and excited by this communication from James, and was for days uncertain how to reply to it. In the meantime she sent off one of her newest portraits, after writing across the corner in her round scrawl: "To Jamie, with my love—Sierra."

Finally, with a feeling that she had crossed the Rubicon, burned her bridges, and taken her life in her hands, she contrived to set down the following:

DEAR JAMIE—

You never asked for my photograph before, so I couldn't be sure if you wanted one. You'd have thought I was pretty fresh if I had sent you one without your asking. After all, anybody can get one now for a quarter.

I think what you say about the hall bedroom and the medicinal whiskey is awful. You said for me never to take any notice of you when you told stories. And you make it sound as though you had stopped loving me when we were twelve. But there was that time in New York when we had dinner together and you gave me your fraternity pin. Mom used to say maybe you'd like

to have it back, and maybe I ought to offer to return it. Must I?

Always your loving,
SIERRA

Well, apparently that was altogether too much for James. He never answered at all, not even to acknowledge the photograph.

There are several reasons, or excuses, if you like, for his silence. In his fierce pride and his ingrowing humiliation at the relative size of her income and his, there is no way for him to say "Marry me." And so possibly he could find nothing to say at all. But Sierra can only blame the apocryphal Society Editor, and cries herself to sleep because she was so silly and tactless and unladylike as to mention the pin—and now apparently he has no desire to redeem it on the usual terms.

All this was a month ago, and neither of them has written again. And if Sierra's meager style is hard on James, starving him of the warm, loving, heartening things he has the right to expect from her, his periodic lapses into the silence of the tomb are equally alienating to Sierra. She cannot comprehend even the fundamental reason for his aloofness, let alone the contributing causes of hard work, fatigue, discouragement, and the driving need to use his spare time to turn out something that will sell. To her, when James doesn't write, it's just because he doesn't care to. And that too is humiliating.

Philip, I regret to say, has fallen in love with her,

and is going to ask her to marry him. The Acklands, though long and painfully aware of James's existence in all Sierra's moods, are on the whole rather pleased at the prospect, and the gossip-writers just can't wait. There seems to be no reason why she should refuse Philip. No reason but James. And James isn't helping.

* * *

March 15, 1934.—This thing is getting out of hand, and somebody is going to get hurt. Tonight was the Academy Dinner, when they present the Oscar statuettes for the best work of the year. Philip and Sierra attended together, in a small gay party where they are now accepted as one of the permanent romances of Hollywood. Philip is known to propose marriage at regular intervals—in fact, he boasts of it—but up until tonight I have been able to postpone Sierra's decision.

Tonight, when James himself arrived at the Dinner with some Press men and was stuck down in an obscure position at the other end of the room I thought we were safe, I really did, although it's been nearly a year now since Sierra wrote that letter about the club pin. Asmilius was looking anxious but determined. I told him he'd better get a move on as things were shaping up pretty rapidly, and he replied with some asperity that perhaps I'd like to have charge of a writer for a while and see where I got with it. I had to admit that James must be hard to handle, and Asmilius was mollified and became communicative.

James has been through quite a lot, in a quiet way, and his inborn wariness of life has, if anything, in-

creased. His thin job somehow held out through the worst of the Depression, and he even solidified his position a little on the paper and got better and more interesting work to do. Also he began to sell things to magazines in a fairly profitable way here and there—a subway vignette, or a colloquial love story (his ear for languages and accents is of great value to his dialogue) or an Open Letter to somebody, or a short and devastating rhyme. His more serious effort, and the fiction output, always came back. He saw a good deal of the underside of life—the men who sold apples, the cheap speakeasies, the small-fry gangsters, panhandlers, drunks in doorways, girls back on the streets after living on Park Avenue, evicted families, bread-lines—sordid, hopeless, draggletail humanity, to whom his starvation wages and shabby furnished room seemed princely. He starved a little more in order to lend them nickels and dimes. His mother? Living on uncertain and dwindling dividends and on the invitations of her friends, most of them also in reduced circumstances; but keeping up a front in a small residential hotel. Nothing to look for there but trouble—debts, no doubt, and unpaid rent, and general nuisance value.

At present James's luck is in, and about time, too. A friend of his on the newspaper staff named Bennett, a sports writer, of all things, wrote a successful play now running on Broadway, and sold it to a Hollywood picture firm. Bennett was to have come out to the Coast to collaborate on the scenario, but at the last minute complications involving an increase in Bennett's family made it necessary for him to remain in New York, and

he got James assigned to the scenario in his place. He says the whole play (called "The Back Stretch") came out of a conversation he once had with James over a couple of beers in a speakeasy anyway, and James is just as qualified as he is to sit in on the film script. Moreover, as things stand now, if James's work on this job is satisfactory he will have the opportunity to stay here and go on doing scenario work. You can imagine his state of mind.

He is taller than ever, and very thin, and his generous mouth has tightened at the corners, which gives him a patient sort of look that goes to the heart of the beholder. His eyelids seem a little heavy, as though he had seen things he would be better off without, and his dark hair has a brushed, meek look. He moves with the same awkward grace I first noticed in the box at Madison Square Garden, economizing space instinctively because of his unusual length. Broad in the shoulders, narrow-hipped, long-legged, with well-kept quiet hands, and those absurdly fringed blue eyes—

At this point in my observations I could not resist an inquiry as to what Asmilius has been doing about the women. *We brush them off like flies*, he replied gravely. I then inquired if none of them ever contrived to adhere, and he explained that even the most adhesive of them could find very little to stick to on James's salary. James is very polite to them, Asmilius added with a certain satisfaction, but when all's said and done, he isn't having any. I was moved to express the hope that Sierra would not have to marry a monk,

and Asmilius said, Not at all, very coldly. I suggested that in any case we had better get on with it, and he cast a disparaging glance at Philip and said he thought things ought to be fairly easy from now on. I advised him to get his man out in the ring as soon as possible or I wouldn't answer for things. Asmilius said James was just off the train, and hadn't got his bearings yet, and therefore was practically certain not to intrude on a private party tonight unless Sierra saw him first. I urged him to stand James up on end exactly where she'd be sure to trip over him before the evening was over, and was requested to keep my shirt on. Asmilius seems very edgy and apparently feels he's done all the work so far. Obviously he underrates Philip.

Just at that moment James spotted Sierra across the room and his face took on a look which any woman worth her salt would walk miles to see. *There*, said Asmilius triumphantly, *what did I tell you!* I could only reply that it wasn't much good to us unless James did it again where Sierra could see him, and the sooner the better. Asmilius said Try and keep him from doing it every time he saw her.

"Do you think I'll get a chance to speak to Sierra Nevada sometime tonight?" James was inquiring diffidently of his sponsor for the evening.

"Sure," said the man, who happened to be Al Bradley who is Philip's agent. "I'll introduce you. Later on, when we start to break up. Remind me."

"I will," said James, so gently as hardly to be heard in the din.

"You're a good picker," Bradley told him cheerfully. "She's a great girl."

"Is she?" said James gently, watching Sierra with that look on his face that is not quite a smile, and is guaranteed to bump a woman's heart against her ribs at twenty paces.

"We all go for Sierra," Bradley went on. "She can have most anything she wants around this town. That's one of my boys next to her, on her right. Philip Jervis. She can have him too, any time she likes."

"Is that so," murmured James thoughtfully, and his left eyebrow went somewhat askew.

Whereupon a fool of a waiter moved a tall vase of flowers into the exact spot to cut off their view of each other for the rest of the evening. *That's torn it*, said Asmilius disgustedly. *Hold tight, now—he's here, and that's something.*

But it's not enough.

During the inevitable roast chicken course somebody at Sierra's table said into a pause—"Al says you've signed for that English picture, Philip. I never thought you'd fall for it."

"It'll be a nice trip," said Philip casually, "with all my expenses paid."

"Hitler will get you if you don't watch out!" cried somebody else, and there was laughter, and the talk turned to the chances of war in Europe.

"English picture?" said Sierra to Philip, with a surprised upward look. "You never told me."

"I was going to," Philip said confidentially, "but not here."

"When do you have to go?"

"I can't tell you now. Later. On the way home. We'll leave early—I hope."

They did, too, immediately after the presentations. There was nothing I could do to stop them.

Hemmed in across the room, James and Al Bradley saw them escape through the door, Philip's hand resting possessively under her elbow.

"That's too bad," said Bradley kindly. "Sierra's never one for the night life. Tell you what, though—there's a party at Ezra Taylor's Monday night—he directed her last picture and is great pals with the Acklands. She's certain to be there. Want to go?"

"Sure," said James.

"I'll fix that, then. Taylor will be glad to know you, he likes your kind of stuff, and it might lead to something for you—something besides meeting Sierra, I mean."

"Thanks," said James.

"You know, she might like you," said Bradley, eyeing James with uncanny prescience. "I don't want to start something. Jervis would have my life."

"I'd settle for her phone number," said James.

"No you don't!" cried Bradley in real alarm. "I'll take you to Taylor's, and after that it's every man for himself. You contain yourself now, till Monday night. I'll have a car at your place about ten. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said James. After more than three years, three days looked easy. He figured that if he worked very hard in the meantime, it wouldn't seem like more than three weeks.

Sierra was very quiet as she and Philip stepped into his car and were driven away. As they left the lights of the Boulevard behind he felt for her hand and curled it caressingly inside both his.

"Tired?"

"No. Philip—that English picture—?"

"Oh, that," he said, pleased with his own strategy. "It all happened rather suddenly. I'm leaving for New York next week to catch a boat from there."

"How long will you be away?"

He shrugged, careful of his effects, playing now for his very life, he knew.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Mostly on you. You see—I'm going to do everything I can to persuade you to marry me and go along."

"Oh, now, Philip, I—"

"You'd be surprised at the things I've thought up to persuade you with," he interrupted, still cradling her hand in his. "We could sail on the damndest boat you ever saw—the *Ile de France*—bridal suite—all the fixings. Ever been abroad?"

She shook her head.

"I have—once. Always wanted to go again. But it wouldn't be so much fun now, unless I could take you with me. I'm crazy about England—I'd like to stay there. Well, for a while, anyway. They *live* so damned well! And then there's Paris. When the picture's finished we'll go to Paris. That will be our real honeymoon. Our second honeymoon, that will be. I want to

buy you nonsense in Paris—hats—furs—diamonds, maybe, who knows?”

“Oh, but Philip, I—”

“Don’t care for diamonds? All right, make it emeralds. We’ll go down to the Riviera—we’ll go to Monte Carlo—Biarritz—wherever we feel like going. We’ll have ourselves a real time. We’ll get a car and drive it ourselves and go just where we happen to, and sleep wherever the moonlight is best.”

He left it at that a moment, lightly, let it sink in.

“I don’t think—” began Sierra feebly.

“Of course I don’t want to hurry you into anything,” he took it up instantly, and his fingers closed harder on hers for a moment. “I realize that this is all very headlong after having known each other such a short time—what is it, now, about two and a half years? And I realize it must be a great shock to you to be asked to marry me for the fourteenth time—or is it the fifteenth? But all the same, Sierra, the time has come when I’ve got to know once more—will you or won’t you?”

“Well, Philip, I—”

“Now, don’t give me a hasty answer, I haven’t finished persuading you,” he interrupted gaily, playing his scene, watching for his moment. “In fact, I’ve only begun this argument. May I come in?” he queried with some confidence as the car turned into Sierra’s driveway.

“Well, it’s pretty late, after all, but—”

“Thank you,” he said quickly, and opened the door and handed her out, and gave her his arm up the steps.

"I knew you wouldn't turn me away from your door on a cold night like this—"

"Philip, you are a loon, I don't think—"

"That's right, don't think, not till after I've had my say," he insisted, and took the key from her hand and opened the house door for her. "And I won't have anything to drink tonight, thank you very much all the same, because this is a job I have to be cold sober to do," he rambled on as they crossed the hall to the lighted drawing-room where a small fire had been left burning in the grate. (He had already had just that one extra highball which with Philip never shows.) "Where's that Miss Thingummy of yours, d'ya think?"

"Gone to bed, I expect. I said she needn't wait up."

"That's good. That's fine. Here, let me—" He removed the fur wrap from her shoulders and laid it aside. The perfume he had taught her to wear wafted up across his nostrils. "How to love Jervis, in five easy lessons," he went on, not quite steadily, and approached her from behind and put his arms around her. "May I begin at the beginning?"

Sierra stood quiet in his embrace. Her face wore a troubled, listening stillness, not surrender, but not quite refusal. He bent his head and very subtly, very quickly and cleverly caught her lips and held them with his own.

Even with James on my mind, I had to admit that it was well done—as prettily done as anything I have seen in years. It so surprised and overcame Sierra that she made no move to resist him, and then it was too

late. It even surprised Philip, I think. He had prepared himself for almost anything from her but docility, but he knew how to keep his advantage.

"You're doing fine," he said very tenderly. "Let's try it again."

Need I defend Sierra? She is young, and alone, and hungry for love, and her blood is warm. The obstinate, uncomprehending, over-disciplined ache inside her that is for James was suddenly soothed and quiescent under Philip's practiced touch. She let go, at last, and relaxed into a delicious sense of warmth and strength and urgency, and Philip found it necessary to pull himself up rather sharply. He was, he found, more in love with this extraordinary creature than he had ever expected to be with anyone.

"When?" he asked abruptly in perfectly normal tones, so that Sierra jumped a little in his hold. "When will you marry me? Tomorrow?"

"If you like," she sighed, and settled herself more comfortably against his shoulder. Nice to leave it all to him now. Lovely not to have to think for oneself any more. Good just to obey again.

"Hooray. We'll fly. Mind flying?"

"No."

"I'll get hold of Al yet tonight—try to convince him I'm sober, and—"

"Are you?"

"Perfectly. Aren't you?"

"I don't know. I didn't drink anything."

"Then you're sober. I'll get Al to fix everything. We'll get married tomorrow and the rest can take care

of itself. Your studio is going to have a fit, I suppose you realize that. It's lucky you're between pictures right now."

"Can they stop us?"

"Nope. But if you jump your contract they'll suspend you, that's what they'll do."

"What does that mean?"

"You don't get paid. You can't work for anybody else."

"I don't care."

"Then the hell with 'em. You can't work for anybody in Paris, anyway—no horses! Now, look, honey, can you get out of here tomorrow morning about nine o'clock without anybody knowing you're on the way to get married?"

"I guess so. But there's Lorna. Oughtn't we to—"

"No, we oughtn't. We won't tell a soul but Al, or we'll have flashlight bulbs going off in our faces. If you want a lot of autograph hounds and reporters on our heels—"

"Oh, no, but—"

"Then you do exactly as I say. Al will fix everything. He'll buy the ring, tell us where to go and what to do, arrange for a minister—and they'll provide the witnesses when we get there. And we'll be back in town, Mr. and Mrs. Jervis, before anybody has had time to miss us! Look out, here I come!" He kissed her again, a hard, gay, possessive kiss, that got to her very bones.

I don't like the looks of this. There is no sense in Philip's getting mangled, and he will, sooner or later, if

he comes between James and Sierra. Carelius, Philip's Angel, has said all along that something of the sort is indicated, and as a consequence isn't being much help.

If we hadn't lost Donna of course nothing like this could have happened. At least not overnight. But with only Miss Evans and the maid in the house now, there is nothing to stop her. I must admit that something of the kind appears on Sierra's Chart too, but I had hoped to get round it, because James is so much stronger than Philip, and the margin has been left very narrow. Sometimes it is possible to stretch the Chart a little if you're careful. And I've been so careful. And we were so near it tonight at the Dinner. This all seems very negligent of Somebody. Why couldn't James have got to her somehow, tonight?

It was his fatal form of humor, Asmilius explained later on, with a sigh. The idea of being introduced to her tickled him. He was holding back for that.

5

March 18, 1934.—Even then, the joke might not have seemed good enough to keep James away from her voluntarily for the seventy-two hours till Monday night. There was no way for him to telephone her without taking somebody into his confidence to get her private number. But there would have been nothing to prevent his going to the Beverly Hills address he had known for years.

Nothing but one of those criss-cross lines of apparently willful confusion which always leave me with a desire to demand reforms Up There—though it never gets you anywhere anyway. I've complained more than once about there being no provision for any co-operation between colleagues. There is too much leeway, I always feel, for contrary influences. The threads of Destiny are not held taut enough, and as a result we sometimes get the most awful tangles. Usually when that happens we're accused of being asleep at the switch, and it's not been our fault at all. Sometimes I could almost allege bad management against somebody Up There, but that won't do, of course. Still, you can't always call them helpful. Com-

munications have improved everywhere else. And if I could have got word to Asmilius on Friday night—

Quite so, the Chart. We aren't supposed to interfere with that. But the way it looks to me, this didn't *have* to happen. Something slipped.

It all looks innocent enough when you put down the facts as Asmilius gave them to me later. James has a collaborator from the studio on the "Back Stretch" script—a harmless man named Davenport. And on Saturday morning Davenport suggested in the most normal way that James drive up with him to his cabin at Arrowhead for the week-end, to break in the job and maybe catch a fish or two. Cornered, as it were, in his hotel-room, James had no visible excuse for refusing to go. He hesitated, but Davenport was airily urgent. James went with an almost psychic reluctance—but he went.

The marriage of Sierra Nevada and Philip Jarvis made the front pages of all the Saturday evening papers, but it wasn't until James arrived at the Taylor party tonight that I realized he didn't know about it. Asmilius of course explained that they hadn't seen the Saturday papers, nor the Sunday ones, for that matter, because of the trip. James had got back to his hotel this evening just in time to dress, and found a cordial message from Taylor to say that he would be delighted to send a car about ten-thirty, and was looking forward, etc.

The car didn't come until nearly eleven. And so the party was well under way, with an orchestra and dancing in the patio which opened off the buffet, when

James arrived alone, without even having talked to Al Bradley, who was waiting for him in the hall, and who introduced him to his host, and then said, "Do you still want to meet Sierra Nevada?" And James in all innocence grinned and said, "I sure do."

"And quite right, too!" said Taylor heartily, with a hand on James's shoulder. "Better have a drink first. They're here somewhere, I saw them a few minutes ago."

It was a large party, covering several rooms and spilling out into the garden. The orchestra was playing and people were dancing. The buffet was crowded. Somebody put a highball into James's hand. He was introduced to a lot of people, who all seemed to regard him with approval. His height, his youth, his direct blue gaze, his agreeable diffidence all contributed to his instantaneous success in an atmosphere where most relationships were wearing a little stale. People—especially women—said, "Who's that?" and the fact that nobody seemed to know was intriguing. James found himself surrounded in no time.

Sierra was happy. Let us make no bones about it, Sierra was radiant. She has been lonely, and much too quiet, since Donna's death. It was great fun to be the newest Bride, to find herself the center of everything, apparently to have done something very popular and frightfully clever, so that she was kissed and toasted and made much of, until not even the cold disapproval of the studio Front Office mattered any more. She was able almost to forget also that Donna wasn't there to see such triumph, forget the silent, empty rooms she

had called home before the expensive interior decoration of Philip's big Spanish house enfolded her—forget the club pin left behind in a bureau drawer—yes, with a little more time and effort, forget James, who would have hated to marry a film star.

And Philip, who was after all entitled to feel pleased with himself, wore a deliberate comic air of modest swagger which some people found very hard to bear. "I never saw Philip look so smug," one young woman was heard to remark brutally, and her best friend answered with a derisive whisper of "Sour Grapes!" To which the first young woman replied that the least he could do now was dance with her, and went off with her nose in the air, to insinuate herself a moment later under Philip's elbow. It appeared that he was quite willing to dance with her.

This left Sierra holding a small court between the buffet and the dance floor, when the music suddenly left off for a moment and she heard a voice speaking just behind her.

"—and as a matter of fact, now that you pin me down," it was saying in gentle, reminiscent tones, "I may as well confess at once that I used to go to Princeton—that's a college they have in New Jersey—and during my junior year, which as you can see was a very long time ago, I studied mathematics under a professor who had a very warped sense of humor. Each morning, just as the class bell rang for dismissal he used to—"

Sierra took two steps back and to the left and looked

up into James's eyes. For just an instant there was some doubt as to what each of them was going to do.

"Hullo," said James then, with all the self-possession in the world. "Fancy meeting me here." And he held out his hand.

Sierra's went into it automatically, but her expression of complete stupefaction did not alter.

"James, what on earth are you doing here?"

"It's quite all right," he assured her gravely. "I was invited."

"B-but why didn't—"

"I was just explaining to these people why I have such a bad head for figures," he went on, with a vague, inclusive glance round the spellbound group which included Robert Ackland. "Would you rather dance it out?"

The music had begun again. He set down his glass, and his encircling arm backed her expertly on to the dance floor.

"Who is that?" said somebody, joining those who stood and watched them go.

"I know who that is!" said Mr. Ackland, in an appalled sort of voice. "That's *James Montgomery!*"

"Who's he?"

"Never mind," said Mr. Ackland, who up till then had been contemplating the tall young stranger with equanimity. "Has anybody seen my wife?" Much shaken, he drifted away towards the buffet.

"You didn't look very glad to see me," James complained, as they slipped into the stream of dancers.

"James, I can't do this—get me outside quick, I—"

"So you can't take it," he jibed softly. "And I thought you were an actress!" He steered her easily out through the patio arches on to the lawn, where lights were strung discreetly through the trees. With his right arm still at her waist, they rounded the end of some shrubbery and were suddenly alone, out of sight of anyone, though the music still reached them faintly. "How's this?" he inquired with a quick glance round. "Somebody has very thoughtfully placed a bench just over there. D'you think bushes have ears?"

"James, how did you get here? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"Well, I was going to wire you before I left New York, but Bennett stuck to me like a burr and I didn't have a chance. You see, the whole thing was very sudden, and then after I got on the Chief I felt so darned silly about writing out a telegram to Sierra Nevada announcing that James Montgomery was coming to Hollywood—can you see that porter's face?—I decided I'd just leave it till I got here, and then I stepped right off the train into the Academy Dinner, and—"

"Were you at the Dinner?"

"Mm-hm."

"I didn't see you."

"I saw you, though. When I asked Bradley if I'd get a chance to speak to you he said he'd introduce me, and that sort of tickled me, I thought—"

"*Al* Bradley? But he's Philip's agent!"

"He said he was, yes."

"But why on earth didn't you—"

"You left too early, before I—"

"But it's three days since the Dinner!" she cried, her words tripping over his. "Where have you—"

"Oh, well, you see, Bradley promised to bring me here tonight, and I thought—"

"But *three days*, James, where were you those three days!"

"Up at Arrowhead, working on the script. Davenport has a—"

"Then you didn't see the papers?"

"What papers?"

"The *newspapers*!"

"No, we didn't see any newspapers up there. Why?"

"Oh, *Jamie*!" wailed Sierra, and put both hands in front of her face.

There was a moment's silence. Then—

"What's the matter?" he whispered, and braced himself. "All right—spring it. What's wrong this time?"

"I married Philip on Saturday," she said behind her hands.

He took it without moving. Only his eyes changed, flickered, hardened.

"Do you love him?" he said at last, as though he asked if she was cold.

"I—did."

"Are you happy with him?" as though he asked if she would like something to drink.

"I was." She caught at him with both hands, and her cheeks were shining wet in the tricky light. "Oh, Jamie, I thought I was—till I saw you again! Why did you have to do this to me? Why didn't you come

sooner—or not at all? Why didn't you answer my letter?" She leaned her forehead against his coat sleeve, hiding her face while the tears ran down.

"About my pin?" His mouth twisted ruefully. "There was only one answer to that, and I wasn't in a position to make it then."

"There was another girl!" she choked, her face hidden from him.

"There was not," he denied patiently, without heat. "I hadn't any money. I barely had a job."

"Money!" sobbed Sierra furiously. "That's twice you've let it matter!"

"It does matter," said James. "It still matters, only now I—"

"You could have *told* me it was only money, then!" she wept. "You needn't have left me to think things!"

"You knew better than to think things," he reminded her gently. "I'm supposed to be the suspicious one. Another girl! You knew you had me—for keeps. In your soul you knew it!" His free hand came up, against his will, to her shoulder. "Oh, my darling, you must have known I'd come to you—somehow. Why didn't you give me just a little more time? I told you it would take time."

"Oh, James, can you *ever* forgive me—"

"This Philip," he said quietly, "is the one who has something to forgive."

At the name she raised her head, stifling a sob with one hand held childishly across her mouth.

"What'll I do? What'll I *do* about Philip?"

"You'll stop crying, first of all. People will notice.

Here." He gave her the clean handkerchief out of his breast pocket. Let's sit down over here while you mop up. Got some powder?" He guided her to the bench, and sat beside her watching while she made repairs with compact and lipstick, noticing with pity how her fingers shook.

"It's lucky you're the sort of girl who can cry without looking like a fright," he said at last, out of his jumbled thoughts. "I never knew that before. It's—kind of a nice thing to know."

"Do I really look all right now?" She returned his handkerchief, and lifted her face for his inspection.

He took his time and gave a considered opinion.

"Mm-hm," he said.

Their eyes locked and held.

"James, I don't care what happens—if I had to go to the electric chair tomorrow, I'd still be glad I saw you again tonight."

"Well, that's fine, I'm glad to hear it," he said, and smiled unbelievably into her tragic face. "But don't let's murder Philip, will we."

"Oh, no, it wasn't his fault!" she assured him at once.

"No," agreed James fairly. "I don't suppose we can say that it was." For a moment more his eyes clung to her, to the fine, pale hair cut shoulder length, the wide, unshadowed eyes, and long, curving lips, the peerless skin, and above all the sheer, vibrant health that made a sort of glow all round her. "Philip never stood a chance, I can see that," he said, and looked away at last, down the sweep of lawn before them which sloped towards the deserted swimming-pool.

"He's nice," ventured Sierra in timid extenuation.

"That's good," said James pleasantly. "That makes it harder."

"James, what are you thinking?" She put a hand on his sleeve and shook it, to bring him back. "James—don't look like that! What are you thinking?"

"Thinking?" His eyes returned to her slowly, a little dazed now, with heavy lids. "I wasn't thinking. That will come later. I don't feel anything yet. I haven't come to. I expect I will, some time before morning, but—I'm not looking forward to that, much. Right now just let me look at you—know that you're here beside me, with your hand on my arm—let me hear your voice again—voices are the hardest things to remember, have you noticed that? I did all right with your eyes, and your hair, and—" His gaze dropped to her lips and rested there. "Especially after the picture came. But your voice—it used to get away from me for days at a time. It's not quite the same on the screen, did you know that? The mike does something to it. Say something, Sierra—"

"I love you so," she said.

With an effort James rose slowly and took a half turn round the bench and stood looking down at her across the back of it.

"I wasn't expecting that one," he said, and smiled again. "I guess I asked for it. But don't do it again—not without any warning, like that."

"But I do—I always have, I always will, I don't know what I was thinking of to marry Philip, I must

have been crazy to think I could ever put anyone else in your place. I don't know what got into me—"

"I do," he said quietly, looking down at her. "I know quite well. And it was all right, till tonight—wasn't it?"

"Well, I—" For once she could not meet his eyes, and he sighed.

"Maybe I shouldn't have showed up again," he said. "Maybe if I keep out of your way from now on—"

"It's too late now," she told him with her devastating frankness. "It was too late as soon as I heard you telling that silly story about Princeton. I'll just have to tell him I can't go."

"Can't go where?"

"Philip's leaving for New York tomorrow to go to England to make a picture."

Once more James took it standing, with flickering eyes.

"When it comes to knockouts," he remarked, "you certainly know how to land them."

"But I'm not going to England now!"

"How do you figure that out?"

"I can't, possibly. Not with you here."

"Now, wait a minute," said James. "I've got no reason to love this Philip like a brother, but at the same time I can't stand by and see him massacred. You can't walk out on him like that, you know. You married him. Remember?"

"You mean I've got to go to England with him anyway?"

He looked at her helplessly.

"Well, what do *you* think?" he asked.

"You mean I've got to stay with Philip *always*?"

"Look," said James reasonably. "We're not at Bar X any more. We're grown up now. You're a married woman. You've stood up in front of a clergyman and— Did you say 'obey'?"

She nodded.

"Yes, you would," said James. "And did you by any chance listen to the marriage service while it was being read over you? Did you happen to hear the words you repeated after the clergyman? Did you understand that you were taking holy vows in the fear of God, making solemn promises that bound you to Philip—forsaking all others, did you notice that one?—that means *me!*—forsaking all others, keeping only unto him, so long as you both shall live!"

Sierra was staring up at him in a rising terror. She had never seen him like this before, with his guard down, without his dear, familiar defenses of levity and the ironic flash of his foolery. This was a James hurt to the very soul, sick and trembling and desperately in earnest, repeating to her by some trick of his educated memory the awful words that gave her to Philip instead of to him.

"James, don't! I didn't realize—I'd never seen a wedding, I didn't know what I was going to have to say, truly I—"

"Never seen a wedding!" echoed James, transfixed and incredulous. "Well, of all the little heathens I ever— Do you mean to sit there and tell me you didn't

even know the words of the marriage service before you came to speak them yourself?"

"Well, how would I see a wedding? None of the boys at Bar X ever got married—" She began to cry again, burying her face against her arm laid along the back of the bench between them. "—and in Hollywood everybody always elopes!"

"God in heaven!" marveled James softly in all reverence. "Sierra, you're not fit to be let run loose. I knew that, of course, but I— How I ever let you out of my sight once I got hold of you again in New York—" He bent over her swiftly, his arm around her shaking shoulders. "All right, now—all right, Sierra. Stop it this minute. Stop crying, Sierra, do you hear?"

At this point, Mr. and Mrs. Ackland rounded the end of the shrubbery together and took in the tableau on the bench with more resignation than shock.

"I knew it," said Mr. Ackland, and bore down upon them with his wife beside him. "Break it up, children, we haven't got all night for this."

James straightened unhurriedly, and the face he turned towards them was guiltless and composed, while Sierra sat up with a jerk, dabbing at her eyes with futile fingers.

"I guess this is my fault," said James. "You see, I've known Sierra ever since we were children and—I probably shouldn't have started talking about her mother, it's made her cry."

"That's nice quick thinking, son," said Mr. Ackland with approval, "but you needn't bother. My name is

Ackland, and this is my wife. I'm her manager," he added, pointing at Sierra.

"I'm—very glad to know you," said James politely.

Sierra left the bench for the shelter of Mrs. Ackland's ready arms.

"It's *Jamie!*" she cried with another gasping sob.

"Oh, Lorna, Jamie's come at last!"

"So we see," said Mrs. Ackland, enfolding her.

"Sierra, stop that howling at once!" commanded Mr. Ackland sharply. "Stop it! Here." He shook out the clean handkerchief from his breast pocket. "Dry her out, Lorna, and let's start thinking clearly, all of us." He glanced with curiosity at James, who was leaning against the back of the bench and waiting enigmatically for whatever was going to be said to him next. "Is there any way, in your long experience, to make her stop crying?" Mr. Ackland inquired conversationally.

"Sierra," said James, without moving, or raising his voice. "Have a heart."

Sierra's tears stopped with a wrench. She straightened in Mrs. Ackland's embrace, and blew her nose on Mr. Ackland's handkerchief.

"I'm sorry, Jamie," she said humbly.

"Thank you," said Mr. Ackland to James with gratitude and deep respect. "Aren't you wonderful! I should have got hold of you years ago!"

"I was born late," said James, and smiled at him.

"People sometimes outgrow things," said Mr. Ackland, smiling back. "Lorna, take Sierra in the back way somehow and powder her nose. After a decent inter-

val, Mr. Montgomery and I will appear discreetly from the opposite direction."

"I can't go in there like this!" objected Sierra in a panic. "I've been crying! Everybody will know something's wrong!"

"Nothing's wrong," said James very quietly from behind the bench. "In you go."

"But, Jamie, I—"

"You're supposed to be an actress," said Mr. Ackland crisply. "Now's your chance to show me."

"But what about Jamie? I can't just—"

"I'll look after Jamie," said Mr. Ackland firmly. "*Git!*"

Sierra's eyes sought James's and found them waiting.

"Remember what you said just now about the electric chair?" he said. "That goes double, for me."

Looking back at him helplessly, she allowed Mrs. Ackland to draw her away, out of sight beyond the shrubbery, towards the lights and the music.

"What's this about the electric chair?" demanded Mr. Ackland severely, when she had gone.

"Not—not quite what you'd think," said James, and felt his way to the end of the bench and sat down rather heavily and put his head in his hands.

Mr. Ackland sat down on the other end and lit a cigarette and waited.

"This Philip," said James at last, his head in his hands, "is he all right?"

"Oddly enough, he is," said Mr. Ackland.

"That's a relief."

"Do I gather that you don't intend to do anything about it, then?"

James dragged himself upright on the bench and looked round over his shoulder.

"What are you suggesting I might do?"

"I'm suggesting you might raise merry hell if you chose to. Oh, I know all about you! James Montgomery is a name to conjure with where Sierra is concerned, you can't fool me. I've been through it all—when you don't write and when you do, one's about as bad as the other! That time in New York she talks about, when she was singing in the rodeo—why in heaven's name didn't you hang on to her then, and save me all this trouble?"

"Then I was at Princeton on an allowance from my mother," James told him explicitly. "There was a crash in the stock market that year, remember? And then some banks failed. My mother's income went. I left Princeton and went to work at the bottom on a newspaper, writing obituaries and that sort of thing. Now I've got a decent job here—I think. So she goes to England with Philip."

"You could stop her," said Mr. Ackland, watching him.

"I know I could."

"But you aren't going to," said Mr. Ackland, watching him.

James glanced at him quickly, and then away again, down at his fine hands gripped together in his lap.

"Are you?" said Mr. Ackland.

"I—don't—know," said James.

"You aren't going to," continued Mr. Ackland confidently, "because to you the vows she made before a country preacher still mean something. Because Philip Jervis is a decent bloke and deserves a break. And because—"

"She'd never seen a wedding before," said James, so softly that his voice broke on the words.

"What? Good God!"

"She'd never heard the marriage service till it was read for her—and Philip," said James, and the knuckles were white on his quiet hands.

Robert Ackland reached out and gripped James's arm just above the elbow.

"Boy, I'm beginning to get some idea what this means to you," he said kindly. "But—"

"If you knew so much about me, why didn't you give me a chance?" demanded James, and rose sharply from under the sympathetic hand, and went round behind the bench again, and found that he was shaking all over, which made him very angry at everybody. "Why didn't you block this marriage somehow, until—"

"I didn't have a chance myself," said Mr. Ackland, who had a grievance of his own here. "They got that fool of a Bradley to fix the whole thing behind my back. What's more, I couldn't be sure of you—until now." He waited till James looked at him inquiringly, and then said, "I can see now, of course, that Sierra has made a mistake. But there isn't anything we can do about it now—is there."

"Isn't there?" said James, and walked up and down a minute to steady his knees. "I don't know," he admitted drearily. "There must be some sort of pattern—I don't know."

"What we really need is a drink," said Mr. Ackland, and they went off arm in arm to get one.

This has to be, said Asmilius heartlessly, as we parted again. The boy is going to do great things. This is all for the best, you know.

I asked him rather tartly, for I confess I feel very upset about the whole thing, how it was best for my Sierra.

Sierra, said Asmilius, is assuagement. Genius can do without assuagement, if it must. This boy is genius. Wait.

Asmilius has never quite got over being with the Spartans at Thermopylae.

* * *

June 16, 1935.—Naturally this time there has been no question of writing letters. The break has been clean and cruel. The Acklands saw to it that there was no opportunity to say Good-by, and Philip has never consciously set eyes on James.

It must be remembered that Philip is a gay, unsearching spirit, and not very deep. His own buoyant excitement over the trip abroad swept him along on the crest of the wave, and he set down any passing queerness of Sierra's to her provincial attachment to the places she has known for years as home, and to her lack of ex-

perience in traveling, and was especially kind and amusing about it all.

Sierra was grateful. Fortunately for them both, her first dazed reaction was towards and not away from the man she had married. He was all she had now. James was gone forever. Philip was all that was left in a bleak and echoing world, and Philip was something warm to hold to, something strong to lean against, something to talk to so that one could not hear one's own thoughts, something to make a cheerful noise with, something that wrought a form of oblivion. She followed him about like a puppy, and Philip was altogether enchanted.

So it was without conscious or dutiful effort on Sierra's part that the first year of their marriage was from Philip's standpoint a huge success. It still never occurred to him to probe below the surface of her mind. She was laughing and kind and ready for anything. And if once in a while she seemed to flag, he reminded himself profoundly that she had been very much uprooted after all, and set himself to devise some form of treat to revive her spirits.

Philip has found in England an environment that he takes to like that duck to water. Film circles here are smaller and in many ways easier and with fewer ramifications than in the intricate industry in southern California. It is possible to live more normally here, somehow more graciously, enjoy more leisure, be less on parade.

After a few weeks in London Philip took a small house in Hertfordshire near the studio, while he was

making the picture. When the lease ended in the autumn they went to Paris. They were in Paris when Alexander of Yugoslavia was assassinated at Marseilles, and the dread of European war rose up again for the second time that summer. Sierra was frightened and wanted to go home.

Philip, whom the international tension only stimulated, said Very well, they could fly back to Croydon tomorrow if she liked.

"I mean *home*," insisted Sierra with rare obstinacy, and he looked at her in surprise.

"You mean *Hollywood*?" he said, as though she meant the moon.

"Well—" She struggled briefly to get into words a growing uneasiness, a longing for familiar ground, a vague, enveloping want, for which homesickness was too specific and narrow a term. "It would be nice, don't you think, to see some of them again, over there—like the Acklands, and—well, we *are* going home soon, aren't we?"

Philip was concerned.

"Why, honey, are you lonesome? I thought you were having such a good time!"

"Oh, I am, Philip, truly I am, only—"

"I did sort of think I'd make that picture at Denham if I get the chance," he ventured, having thoroughly made up his mind to. "I'd be working with one of the greatest directors of all time, and—"

"But they aren't even going to start shooting it till spring!" she cried in dismay.

"No, of course not—on account of the location

work. Look, honey, I thought we'd get a house, a really nice one, for the summer, and—"

"Oh," said Sierra very quietly, so that he needn't notice.

"—and we'll get in a couple of horses and you can ride again. How would that be?"

"That would be swell."

But she faced it with a conscious stiffening of resolve. Almost another year of England, that would mean. But she realized that after all there wasn't anything very much to go home *for*. They have friends here—dozens of friends. Sierra owes the studio in Hollywood three more pictures on her contract before she is free to work for anyone else, but she has not the born actor's need to work. She doesn't really care if she never faces a camera again. It's something to do, and the money is nice to have, and people are fun to work with. But acting, *per se*, is not in her blood.

So, as the second summer in England begins, Sierra is on the whole content to hold the script on Philip's lines, to poke about on the edges of his sets and join the informal parties which accumulate casually for drinks and meals at odd hours in picturesque surroundings. Everybody is glad to have her about, with her puppy-like friendliness and willingness to participate in anything that's going. Philip is proud of her, proud, more than anything else, of her obvious dependence on himself, the touching way she looks up to him, the confiding hand that slides into his now and then like a lost child's seeking reassurance.

Bad correspondent as Sierra is, she does keep more or

less in touch with Lorna Ackland in Hollywood, and looks forward to the budgets of news which arrive periodically from there. Mrs. Ackland can read between the lines to a certain extent, but I have no doubt she had begun to hope that what she privately calls *l'affaire James* was beginning to solve itself when a month or so ago she received the following from Sierra:

DEAR LORNA—

I expect you have been wondering what has become of me, I have been settling into the house where we are going to live this summer while Philip is working at Denham. Not that I have very much to do, really, but Philip says I potter. It's really very wonderful how Philip adapts himself, he doesn't seem to mind a bit that he's using other people's bureau drawers and cupboards—I'm not allowed to say closets here—and he goes quite happily from one hotel to another, and when we've only taken a house for three months you'd think he was going to spend the rest of his life here. I'd be kind of glad to get back to things I could feel were my own, but I don't see much sign of that for some time to come. Philip says he'll send me home like a shot if it looks as though we are really going to have a war on account of Abyssinnia, but he doesn't think the people at Geneva are going to do anything but talk. He doesn't seem to think he'd mind a war himself, but I don't see why he shouldn't come back with me in any case, because who will care whether the picture is finished or not if England goes to war.

This house we've got has a lovely big garden full of flowers, and I'm getting so I can talk quite learnedly about delphiniums and antarrihnums—that's spelled wrong, I know, it's what they call snap-dragons here, and you can make them gape like little mouths by pinching the sides of the flower. But I expect you know all that, Philip says everybody wasn't brought up in a state of total barbarism on a ranch.

Well, I guess that's all the news for now, Philip is quite happy about the new picture, and says everybody is marvelous to work with. He's got a nice fat part with a death scene, and is going to be very good in it.

Give my love to Robbie, and anybody there who remembers me, and don't forget me yourself.

Lovingly,
SIERRA

P.S. When you write next, please tell me if you ever hear anything about James. Did he stay in Hollywood or has he gone back to the newspaper in New York?

In reply, Mrs. Ackland filled two pages with tactful chatter and then, no doubt sighing gustily, set down a final paragraph:

As for James Montgomery, he is still here, and whenever we do happen to cross each other's paths, which isn't often, he looks at me with utter loathing and departs as rapidly as possible in the opposite direction. I think his newspaper days are over, as he is do-

ing very well here, and has apparently set himself to learn the industry from the ground up. He had a book published this spring which was highly spoken of, but Robbie says it will net him very little money as it's not the sort of thing they make movies of. I suppose what you really want to know is, Is he married? He's not. Plays the field discreetly, and not too much of that, and altogether must be driving half a dozen of them almost crazy with frustration. Robbie says he (James) has a way of suddenly looking at them as though they were beetles on a pin, which stops them in their tracks—swears he's seen him do it, more than once. It's probably not a side of his character you're familiar with. Myself, I have no doubt that he *can* be had, and if I was ten years younger I'd roll up my sleeves and undertake to land him without the gaff just for the hell of it—with your permission, of course. He hasn't put on any weight, but seriously, my dear, he's doing all right here, and you've nothing to reproach yourself with any more.

Well, at least it was comforting to know that James was enjoying himself, and doing work he liked. Sierra sent for his book, which came today, and she cherishes it pathetically, smoothing the bright paper jacket between her hands and sniffing the fresh smell of ink and new paper which lives between its pages. It is the only thing of his she has ever possessed, except the dog-eared copy of "Swiss Family Robinson" he left at Bar X, and the Princeton club pin. And even though it is once-removed, as it were, having never been han-

dled by him, something of him is distilled in it, rendering it very precious.

Its actual contents are one version of the Depression, told in terms of an old Italian woman who kept a boarding-house in Manhattan—not a romantic theme, you can see, not spectacular nor tricked out with sex—but done with a sure and delicate touch and an ear for colloquial speech which have caused certain serious-minded critics to sit up. The general opinion seems to be that James Montgomery will Bear Watching.

* * *

July 29, 1937.—It was bound to happen, I suppose, I only had to wait for it. James has come to England, the modest pride and joy of the American film company which has assigned him to write and supervise a story with an English locale starring one of the best young American actors.

Besides his authorship of what proves to be a very useful piece of film script, James's five years of residence here as a boy are supposed to come in very handy now—qualifying him to bear-lead the star, who has never before been east of Kansas City, and to form contacts and deal tactfully with people here whom otherwise it would be difficult to approach.

It is solely because of James, who was at Eton with the boy who has since become the Duke of Anniersley, that the American film company is allowed the run of the most jealously guarded Jacobean pile in Oxfordshire, for its location shots. James happened to know

that the young Duke, still known to his intimates as Nannie, needs money very acutely, and James also had no embarrassing inhibitions about broaching financial details. (The negotiations, I am told, consisted chiefly of James inquiring of Nannie over a whiskey-and-soda at the latter's club just how much was needed to put him right with the world for a while, and Nannie's prompt recital of the figures. The film company paid through the nose for the use of Annersley Hall, under the impression that it had received a bargain, and the Duke will just scrape through on his taxes as the result of James's connections.)

James's own salary is not excessive, but he has an expense sheet as well, and though he sends back half of each pay check now to his mother in New York, he manages to have enough for the rent of his small flat in Half Moon Street and occasional suppers at the Savoy Grill, and to get round Town generally. The car he drives is supplied by the studio.

Sierra had several weeks' warning of his arrival, in a letter from Lorna Ackland, who finished off a highly camouflaged page of gossip and questions about the Coronation—Philip and Sierra had witnessed the procession expensively from an upper window at the Berkeley—by adding an unwilling postscript, thus:

I feel it my bounden duty to tell you, much as I would prefer to have had nothing whatever to do with it when the Day of Judgment comes, that James Montgomery has just been assigned to a job in England, as wet-nurse to the Morrison boy who is being sent over

there to make a picture. It's got round here that James went to Eton and therefore can be relied on to prevent M. from shaking the King's hand, or driving on the wrong side of the road, or whatever. It saves the company the price of a book on etiquette too, and may fend off embarrassing incidents for the whole unit. Well, it's no secret anyhow that the job has been wished on to your James, and it's not supposed to be any cinch.

Now I know this is none of my business, and that I am as usual asking for a kick in the teeth, but Sierra, lamb, *don't* go seeing a lot of him, will you, and *don't* let anything happen now to bring me to an early grave! After all, it's been three years. Let it go, there's a good child. Keep out of his way. He won't be working at Philip's studio, and that's something.

It was very nearly enough. But when at last their meeting came today, towards the end of James's assignment here, it was as always with them unexpected and yet inevitable.

Philip and Sierra have been living at the Dorchester for a few weeks, in order to satisfy Philip's taste for the gaieties of Coronation Season. Today they drove down to Oakfield for tea. Oakfield is a large Georgian mansion standing in its own park and gardens. It has recently been bought by a film company and turned into a sort of country club, attached to a new studio which has gone up near by.

The downstairs drawing-rooms needed very little alteration to become spacious lounges. The library is

now a charming paneled bar with small tables set round the cushioned seats under the windows, and the ball-room has become a dining-room where, in the event of night-work on the stages, it is not uncommon to dine in costume and make-up. The upstairs has been divided into bedrooms or suites with private bathrooms, all very luxurious and expensive. You can have tea on the stone-flagged terrace outside the bar, level with the perfect lawn which runs down to the rhododendron walk, on the left of which lie the old, well-tended gardens, and on the right of which a path leads off to the new sound-stages, well-hidden behind a grove of trees.

There was no reason, even if they had been trying to avoid each other, why either James or Sierra should have anticipated that the other would turn up at Oakfield this afternoon. It is not James's studio, but part of it has been lent to his company for a special job on back-projection. It is not Philip's studio either, but near enough so that he contemplates taking rooms there during the work on his next picture, which starts shooting the first of the week.

However, along about 4:30 this afternoon, when yellow sunlight was laying lengthening shadows across the velvet lawns below the terrace, James on his lawful occasions drove up in his two-seater, parked it on the gravel sweep in front of the house, and set out along the shortest route across the terrace towards the rhododendron walk and the sound-stages and the back-projection job. He was accompanied by that same Geraldine Brett-Dawson, who, as a bosom pal of the

Duke's sister, was accustomed to see a good deal of James during the holidays when he came to stay at Annersley wearing an Eton collar.

As Geraldine is several years younger, he used not to take much notice of her. On his first return to Annersley this summer for a week-end, the tall young woman who was a fellow-guest turned out to be the Geraldine he had so unremittingly ignored some dozen years ago. Looking at her with increased interest, he admitted that he found her very changed, especially, he added innocently, holding a match to her cigarette that first day of the week-end, as to the color of her hair. Geraldine said Nonsense, it was always quite red, and had only got darker. James said he wasn't suggesting anything, to which she replied in her clear and carrying tones that he always was a Beast.

It may be, as Asmilius surmised during our conference at Oakfield today, that the first requirement for a woman who aspires to James is that she must somehow create in him some inner agony of unholy mirth, even while he regards her always with a perfectly straight face. Certainly Sierra never failed unconsciously to amuse him, and this Geraldine seems to tickle him no end.

She isn't funny to look at. Quite the contrary. Five feet eight, with a twenty-three-inch waist, her dark red hair in a long, careless bob, her white skin accented by a mouth like a scarlet gash, wearing her expensive clothes with a mannequin slouch, Geraldine is just the fabulous sort of creature who in books by the more sensational novelists always inhabits Mayfair. Her

voice, too, is purest Mayfair, first in its unself-conscious penetrating timbre, and also in its excessive long o's and pinched long i's and wide open broad a's which so often bring the speech of the aristocracy so perilously near to cockney at the other end of the scale. The Brett-Dawsons own coal-mines, and hence they still have money. Geraldine has been presented at Court, and she sometimes acts on the films and at the suburban try-out theaters, and takes it very seriously too.

But none of this is important, said Asmilius, concluding his report, except as it bears on the mysterious fact that she has succeeded in doing just one thing wherein all her predecessors in James's life have failed: Geraldine adheres.

From the moment she spotted James from the library window at Annersley, when he arrived with the Duke and the Morrison boy for that week-end, Geraldine coveted him—openly, shamelessly, and without mercy. James, somewhat to everyone's surprise, surrendered almost without a struggle. He just threw up both hands, the Duke described it graphically in a whispered discussion with his sister on the Monday, and went down for the third time. Sunk without a trace, by gad. Old Dobbin, of all people. It didn't, said the Duke, seem possible, but there it was.

I inquired of Asmilius just here if Geraldine did not, after all, come under the heading of what he had once called assuagement, and he replied that in this case he would prefer to say *divertissement*. That being, I re-

marked, something which even genius could not do without. *Well, not altogether*, said Asmilius, closing it.

So there was Geraldine today, crossing the terrace at James's side, no hat on her spectacular hair, her frail figure severely clad in a trim dark suit with a white frill, her mouth deep scarlet in her pearly face, and artificial eyelashes out to here, the expensive kind that are stuck on one by one.

And there sat Philip and Sierra, having tea at a table half way along the terrace, making two of a party of six, the other four engaged in convincing them what a really top-hole place Oakfield was to stay in.

Just as Geraldine's approach began to impinge on the consciousness of the three men in the circle round the tea-table, Sierra, whose back was towards the drive, began to rootle about in her hand-bag for something. Just as James and Geraldine came level with Sierra's chair from behind, and Geraldine sang out a ringing "Hullo-o, Jeff!" to the man on Philip's right, Sierra's large round compact slipped out of her fingers and rolled across the flagstones towards James's feet, where it came to rest, open. Automatically he stooped to retrieve it, and as he straightened with it in his hand—

"Fortunately the mirror didn't br—" he began, and found himself looking into Sierra's face.

"That's good," she said coolly, after only a split second's pause, and took it from his paralyzed hold "I've already had my seven years' bad luck."

"I get it," said James quite normally. "And very nicely put, too."

Introductions by Jeff were going on all round the table. Chairs scraped back, the men were on their feet, a waiter hovered.

"Well, as a matter of fact," James was saying then in his quiet voice which was somehow audible in the din of hospitality, "I was just on my way over to Number Three Stage, we've got a unit working there, and—"

"Back-projection," said Geraldine, cutting across him like a knife, and she sat down in Jeff's proffered chair. "You know what *that* means! Do sit down a minute, Jimmy, and give me a sherry or something, my tongue is hanging out. Everybody sit down and have a drink, Number Three can wait, we'll be there all night anyway!"

James looked at his watch. He had said about five o'clock.

"Sherry," he repeated obediently. "O.K. Anybody else want sherry? I'd like some tea if there's any left—"

"Jeff, have them bring a fresh pot of tea, this one has all gone to soup," commanded Jeff's wife.

"Drag up another chair," said the man they called Bill, and did so himself, noisily. "There you are, old boy, right next to Mrs. Jervis. What more could you ask?"

"Thank you," said James, and sat down next to Sierra but at a little distance, without placing the chair.

"That's better," said Geraldine in his direction, and pushed back her hair with a pale hand, scarlet-tipped. "He *towers* so," she confided to anyone within fifty yards, "I never can relax till he's sat down."

"Tea's coming," Jeff's wife assured James cordially, "and some more bread-and-butter. Or would you like a sandwich? I can recommend the cress."

"Thank you," said James again, and smiled at her in a way to make her head go round. "I could do with a cress sandwich."

"Then you shall have it," said Jeff's wife. "Oh, there's the waiter now. Sierra, what would you like, more tea or sherry?"

"Sherry," said Sierra suddenly, a little too loud, and Philip glanced at her with an approving grin.

"Attagirl," he said. "Let us be gay. I like this place. That makes five sherries, two gin-and-French, and fresh tea for Mr. Montgomery."

"And cress sandwiches," added Jeff's wife. "And take all this dead food away now when you go—I can't bear a used-looking tea-table!"

"Jimmy never drinks before sundown," explained Geraldine complacently. "It's an old Californian custom."

James gave her an apologetic sort of smile, and put his hat and a frowsy bunch of script under his chair where he would be sure to forget them.

"I just feel like a nice hot cup of tea," he remarked to nobody in particular, and nobody took it up with him further.

Talk eddied and swirled and surged round the table—the clarion, punctuated talk of the highly-bred British. The drinks came, and everybody was glad to see everybody aboard, etc. The fresh tea came, and Jeff's wife poured it out, and was amazed to learn

that James took nothing in it at all—just like a Chinaman, Geraldine contributed in parentheses.

James accepted a cress sandwich and relaxed into his chair, cradling his nice hot cup of tea with a hedonistic concentration while everything flowed over and around him.

Sierra, sitting at a little distance sipping her sherry, stole a glance at him, and then another. She was seeing him for the first time with a woman's eyes—the really incredible length of him, folded expertly into an ordinary chair—the thinness of him, still visible at throat and wrists and waistline in spite of his English tailor—the vital spring of his brushed dark hair, and that odd, patient draw at the corners of his generous mouth. But the old appealing diffidence was seasoned with self-possession now. There was money in his pocket, and the tailor was the best in Savile Row. He had something everybody else at the table somehow lacked—a reality, an effortless repose, dignity, simplicity—She had no words for what James had, but she recognized it with a shiver of sheer delight. Life's being good to you at last, she thought, and I'm so glad—so desperately glad. . . .

And James, who never seems to hear what is going on all round him unless he chooses to, was deeply and disturbingly aware of Sierra sitting beside him, sherry glass in hand—polished, poised, fashionable, a married woman, with all the old sweet *gaucherie* gone—laughter that came readily, idiom that fitted the talk she joined in, holding her own now, giving back as good as she got, with her husband's eyes possessively upon

her across the table. She's had to learn things, he thought wincingly, as he drank his tea—learn to bear things, learn to do without things—not my Sierra any more—not my funny, lost, fuddled kid ever again—maybe my Sierra is still there, somewhere, but only for me now, never for other people to see—perhaps it's just as well. Disillusionment strove with his loyalty. It's my fault, he reminded himself behind his teacup—whatever they've done to her, it's my fault—I could have stopped her—Ackland knew that—I'll have to make it up to her somehow—oh, my darling, I'm sorry, what can I do. . . .

Then suddenly, without intention, they met each other's eyes, and all calculation, all reticence went in that one swift revealing moment. Sierra and James, together again. There was nothing else.

He set down his cup with a quick, decisive movement, and hitched his chair across the intervening space between them.

"That Ackland woman," he said quietly, "sent her regards, if I saw you. Her love, I believe she said."

"Do you really loathe her so, James?"

"I certainly do," he confessed regretfully, but without emphasis.

"It wasn't her fault, you know."

"All right, it was my fault," said James amiably. "I still don't like her."

"Sometimes I'd give a good deal to see her again," said Sierra.

"Don't you like it here?" The quick question was pitched very low.

"Oh, I like it fine," she assured him at once, and her voice was hardly above a whisper. "Only—well, England's a funny place. I guess I'll never get used to it. I guess I don't rightly belong here."

"I could show you an England where you belong—"

"Jimmy, have you got my cigarettes, darling?" Geraldine's voice cut across his quiet words.

"Uh—yes, I have." Imperturbably James fished a slim shagreen cigarette-case out of his coat pocket and extended it to her, open. "Sorry."

"Thanks." She took one, and Philip, sitting beside her, struck the match.

James snapped shut the case and returned it to his coat pocket—a routine gesture of pure habit which spoke volumes.

"I haven't seen Sierra since we were both in Hollywood," he said with an unembarrassed glance round the company. "We knew each other when we were kids, before she ever went there."

"Don't Montgomery's women *wear* well!" marveled the man they called Bill. "Here's Geraldine, knew him when he was at Eton!"

"Oh, now I know where I've seen you before!" cried Geraldine, and stabbed the air with her cigarette towards Sierra. "You used to be on the films when I was at school. You sang cowboy songs. We girls all thought you were wonderful."

There was an instant's pause. Only an instant, but a pause, during which James sent Geraldine an incredulous glance under his lashes while his left eyebrow slipped slightly out of line—and Philip wheezed into

his glass and begged everybody's pardon with indecent haste. Sierra took it without blinking.

"Did any of my pictures ever come here?" she said in naive surprise. "I shouldn't have thought anybody here would have known what they were all about!"

Bill's wife began to tell a rather extemporaneous story about what Bill's manager had said the other day about musicals, Nelson Eddy notwithstanding. And Jeff broke in to say how really lovely it was at this time of day down here, and how he wished that they could stay on for another week, he really did. And Philip said it was nice to think they had it all before them, and hoped the weather would hold. And gradually everybody breathed easier.

"What I don't understand about this place," James was saying quietly to Sierra, "is how nobody ever takes any notice of the garden. They just sit around like this or in the bar swilling tea and sherry, and there's a rose garden out there blooming its fool head off. Would you like to see it?"

Sierra said she would, and James stood up.

"We're just going down for a quick look at the gardens," he said. "I'm due over at Number Three this minute, so we won't be long."

And somehow, without any fuss or delay, he had extracted her from the tea-table and was walking with her towards the rhododendrons.

"You just come round this corner here," he was saying, a hand at her elbow, "and there it all is. And all wasted. Seems too bad, doesn't it."

"Yes, doesn't it," said Sierra, and stumbled a little on

the smooth grass, so that his fingers tightened instinctively on her arm.

"Pick 'em up," he said gently, and they came suddenly into the scent of roses in the late sunlight. The terrace lay out of sight behind them on the other side of the tall rhododendrons. "See—I told you. And they keep it so nice and tidy too."

"It's lovely," said Sierra, and took a deep, steadying breath of the sunlit sweetness. "I might never have found it. Thank you for showing me."

"Don't mention it," said James, and his voice had changed so on the commonplace words that she looked up at him involuntarily, and found his eyes waiting. James and Sierra, together again.

"Are you happy?" he asked, very low.

"Are you?" she asked, her chin a little out, her clear eyes unflinching under straightened brows.

"So you hand 'em right back to me now," he discovered with a rueful smile. "I guess I deserved it. No, neither am I—but then, we didn't expect to be, did we." He waited a moment, watching her face, while she stood gazing down the garden, and the silence drew taut between them. "Now, about your not liking England," he resumed, just in time. "That worries me, because I could fix that. There is an England that I know very well, that you'd love as much as I do. I could show it to you, if there was time."

"How much time would it take?" she asked, with her eyes still turned resolutely away from him.

"Oh, from before lunch till after dinner—in a car. How would we be fixed for that?"

"*Jimmy!*" Geraldine's voice cut the air like a bright blade between them.

"Coming!" he called back, and turned unhurriedly in the direction of the terrace again. "Where are you staying?" he went on, as though there had been no interruption.

"The Dorchester, right now. We'll be down here, I guess, beginning next week."

"*Oy! It's after five!*" slashed Geraldine's voice again, just as they emerged into the rhododendron walk.

"Coming, coming," he repeated, without altering the leisurely pace he had set. "I'll call you at the Dorchester, then. It'll have to be soon, because I'm going to Paris next week for I don't know how long, and—"

"James, I can't. Don't call me, I'd better not."

"O.K., so you'd better not," he agreed without looking at her, as they approached the end of the terrace. "We're going to be late," he said accusingly to Geraldine as she came to meet them, followed by all the others.

"That's what I keep *telling* you, idiot!"

"Wait a minute—I've got a script some place—under my chair, I guess—" He drifted on, towards the deserted tea-table.

"He's got no memory," complained Geraldine, while they all stood waiting. "I suppose it's a sign of genius. I'm taking charge of everything on this Paris trip myself, or we'll never get beyond Croydon! Do hurry up, Jimmy, we'll miss dinner at this rate!"

"Coming, coming, coming," repeated James lightly, arriving with hat and script. "Don't bustle

me, it paralyzes my nerve-centers. Good-by, all, thank you for my cup of tea!"

"Jim, I say, will you be down here tomorrow?" Bill yelled after him.

"I think so. Why?" James paused among the rhododendrons.

"You and Philip and I could lunch together—he's making color tests just over the way tomorrow."

"Fine! I'll try and remember."

James disappeared in Geraldine's wake, carrying his hat and the frowsy script, towards Sound Stage Number Three.

There was a slight silence among the group on the terrace until Bill's wife said brightly, "Did anybody else hear what I thought I heard about that Paris trip?"

"Rath-er!" said Bill, and he sounded bored. "You don't think she'd turn him loose there, do you? How about a little drink?"

They drifted back, full of aimless, cheerful chatter, towards the bar.

"What a hussy that Brett-Dawson girl is!" remarked Philip in the car on the way back to London. "All right if you like that sort of thing, I suppose—but *what* a hussy!"

Sierra said she didn't think that was a very nice word to use, and Philip replied tersely that you didn't need a very nice word for Geraldine Brett-Dawson.

They had arranged to go to the theater tonight, and there was something of a scramble to get dressed in

time. After the performance four of them went on to the Savoy Grill, and there they ran into four other people they knew and became eight.

"What does anybody want to drink?" Philip inquired when they were all settled at one table where they could be seen from both entrances, and the head waiter lingered at his shoulder.

"Let's have champagne," said Sierra.

"You're getting to be a regular drunkard," said Philip admiringly. "Champagne it is!" And he went into a learned huddle with the head waiter over the wine list.

It was late when they got back to the Dorchester, and Philip yawned as he unlocked their door, and sat down heavily in an armchair and cursed the color tests tomorrow.

"I'll have to be up and out of here by eleven o'clock," he grumbled. "Did you see Montgomery's gold-plated tart at the Savoy with the Prentis gang? Boy, oh, boy, he's a better man than I am, she scares me right down a rat-hole!" His shoes dropped one by one.

"Was he there too? I didn't notice." Sierra sat at the dressing-table, her back to the room.

"Nope. 'Jimmy' got the evening off. Probably still at the studio trying to get a little work done."

"Philip, maybe you oughtn't to call her names like that."

"Well, what would *you* call her?" he muttered, and wriggled out of his dinner jacket without rising, and hurled it at the end of the bed, where it landed as

neatly as though placed by a valet's careful hands. "She may have a hyphen in her name and an uncle in the Peerage, but tart is still the word. Mind you, I don't care what people do with their spare time! Only I object to having it rammed down my throat at the top of her voice!"

Sierra got up from the dressing-table and came and sat down on the arm of his chair.

"Then you don't think she's—you wouldn't rather I was more like her?"

"God forbid!" said Philip fervently, plucking at his tie.

"Philip."

"Mmmmmmm?"

"Would you say you were glad you had married me?"

"Say, are you tight?" he queried, squinting up at her with his collar all awry.

"No, I just wondered if—if sometimes when you see somebody like—like that, who fits into places like the Savoy better than I do, and—well, sometimes I wonder if you wouldn't rather have an English wife—"

He reached for her then, and tipped her off the arm of the chair into his lap, with her slippered feet dangling and her face hidden against his stiff shirt-front.

"I still like the wife I've got," he said rather thickly. "Even when she's drunk as a little hoot-owl. Who had too much champagne, h'm—who besides me?"

"I'm not drunk, Philip, honest, I only—"

"Funny face," he whispered against her hair. "How much of that stuff did you tuck away? You're not in

her class, you know. She can drink you under the table in no time!"

"I'm glad you like me best," she murmured drowsily, her face still hidden.

"I know when I'm well off!" he corrected confidently. "You can't handle her kind unless you've been to Eton!"

And James? I checked up on James later, so it might as well go in here.

It seems that while he and Geraldine were still at Oakfield, James was overtaken from within by a job of work which had to be done before morning. He left Sound Stage Number Three rather abruptly, bundled a still protesting Geraldine into the two-seater, and drove her at great speed back to Town, where he dropped her at her flat near Berkeley Square and took the car on to its garage in a mews near Half Moon Street.

And then, having cleared his decks, he looked round for some form of action. There wasn't really anything like a job of work, of course. He had merely felt an overwhelming need to get away from Oakfield and Geraldine, and he had done so, and now here was the evening, staring him in the face, and what was he going to do with it?

While he was wondering about this, he found he had overshot his own door in Half Moon Street, decided that it didn't matter, and kept on, without purpose, walking down Piccadilly. When he reached the Circus he went into the Brasserie there and had a kipper

and a glass of beer and called it dinner. Emerging again, still at a loose end, he drifted down across the Mall into St. James's Park, where he stood for some time on the bridge watching the ducks and the reflections, until roused to motion again by the lock-out call.

Along the Mall and Constitution Hill he went on foot, and up Park Lane to Marble Arch, where it somehow penetrated his abstraction that he was in time for the last show at the cinema there. He bought a ticket and went in, and sat right through the program to "God Save the King" without taking in a word of it, and then found himself out on the pavement again with the need to keep on going. People were running for buses. James set out on foot along Bayswater Road, and never came to again till he had reached the darkling wastes of Notting Hill. Here he crossed the road, for something to do, turned up his coat collar against the chill night air, and began the return journey down the other side, which soon brought him next the park railings on his right.

Some time later, which means in the very small hours of the morning, he was observed by a policeman sitting on a bench near the Lancaster Gate entrance. It was a policeman of the old school, not one of your Trenchard men with an Oxford accent.

"Are you all right, sir?" the policeman inquired solicitously, pausing beside the long, lax figure on the bench.

James looked up at him slowly from behind those shielding lashes, without moving.

"Well, no," he said consideringly, "now that you

ask me, I'm not. I'm cold sober, though, if that's what you mean."

"Getting a bit late, isn't it, sir?" suggested the policeman tactfully.

"Is it?" said James without interest.

"Better be getting along 'ome, sir, if I might say so."

"What's really on your mind," said James with his usual remarkable penetration, "is whether I've got any place to go when I leave this bench. Well, I have. Would you be any happier if I took a taxi to my rooms in Half Moon Street now, and stopped all this nonsense?"

"Well, I don't know about 'appy, sir—and it's a bit late to pick up a cab round about 'ere—"

"Where are we?" asked James. "I don't seem to remember."

"Lancaster Gate, sir."

"Why, so it is." James dragged himself to his feet and settled his soft hat at a more responsible angle. "Well, nice to have known you. By the way—have you ever been in love?"

The policeman permitted himself to smile at that.

"Why, yes, sir—now and then."

"Now and then," echoed James, staring at him owl-ishly. "Yes, that's the best way, I guess. You see, I've done rather a long stretch. I fell in love when I was twelve—and I'm twenty-six now. You'd think I'd get over it, wouldn't you. Well, I don't. What I've got is chronic. There's no cure. What would be your advice, in a case like that?"

"I'd get 'ome to bed, sir, if I was you."

"That's a very good idea," said James, as though much struck. "I never thought of that. Good-night."

"Good luck, sir."

And as James set off again eastwards along the park railings, he knew just as well as he had known eight or nine hours before that he was going to call Sierra in the morning, while Philip was making color tests, and ask her to have lunch with him. He knew, too, that she would not refuse.

6

July 30, 1937.—When the telephone rang a little before noon today Sierra knew perfectly well who it would be.

"Hullo," said James, with a note of apology in it. "Well, how about lunch today after all?"

"Yes, Jamie." The words were small and somehow helpless.

"Meaning Yes you will have lunch with me."

"Yes, Jamie."

"Well, I sort of hoped you'd feel that way about it. Would you like to go to the Ivy and brazen it out where everyone is sure to see us, or would you take a chance on something more private?"

"Yes, Jamie."

"I see. Well, don't let anything jar you out of that state of mind before I get there. Now, one thing more. You haven't got a three o'clock engagement, or anything like that, have you?"

"N-no—"

"Because if you have, you might as well cancel it now. I'll see you in about ten minutes. How does that sound at your end of the line?"

"Wonderful."

"I thought it sounded pretty good right here when I said it. The car's outside, and all I have to do is get past that bobby at the bottom of Park Lane. If I don't show up, you'll know he's pinched me at last."

"Jamie."

"Yes'm?"

"What shall I wear?"

"Well—what have you got on now?"

"A tweed suit."

"What color?"

"Blue. Light blue."

"That sounds fine. I'll try and remember to look at it when I come, and if I like it as well as I do from here we'll put a hat and coat on top of it. Shan't I start now?"

"Yes, Jamie."

"Make it nine minutes."

His receiver clicked on the hook.

Sierra hung up slowly, and sat a moment beside the phone. Her hands were suddenly cold, moist paws, and her stomach felt full of butterflies. Over and over again since yesterday she has promised herself not to see James again, first on account of Philip, and second—a very close second—on account of Geraldine Brett-Dawson. But she had only to hear his quiet voice on the telephone for a sort of galloping demoralization to set in.

On an impulse of pure panic, she put on a hat and caught up a coat and hand-bag, and went down to the main foyer to wait for him. She simply didn't dare let him walk through the door of the suite where she

and Philip lived, lest something of what lay between them should linger there, in the very atmosphere, to complicate Philip's return. She was determined that no matter what happened between them today it would never touch Philip's life in the smallest degree. James is not much more than a name to Philip now, and it is best that he should remain that way.

When James saw her sitting there in the foyer like a good child, wearing a small tweed hat and with a topcoat folded over her arm, a brief glint of knowing glee lit his blue eyes and was gone again in his casual greeting.

"Hullo," he said, ambling up to her. "Do you think it would be safe to shake hands with me? People do, in a place like this."

Sierra gave him an obedient paw, and he relinquished it after no more than the customary lapse of time, and grinned down at her serious, upturned face.

"It's all right," he said consolingly. "We aren't breaking any one of the Ten Commandments if we lunch together."

"I break them all every time I see you, I guess," she admitted, and her eyes were defenseless under his steady gaze.

"All of them?" he queried with a lively interest. "I bet you don't even know them all."

Sierra stood still, looking up at him.

"James, how did you get out of going to the studio?"

"Oh, that. I just told a couple of whoppers on the phone this morning. It'll be all right if the wrong peo-

ple don't get together and start checking up. Are you hungry?"

"Not yet."

"That's good, because you're not going to get fed for maybe an hour. I thought we'd go out in the country to a place I know."

Moving beside him in a sort of haze, Sierra arrived at the two-seater parked beside the curb, and was driven away from the Dorchester, up Park Lane, left along Bayswater Road towards Western Avenue. . . .

James drove easily, concentrating on the traffic, relaxed and efficient behind the wheel. Sierra sat quietly with her hands lying together in her lap. She felt above everything else a high, exultant sense of flight, of complete amputation from life—free—immune—unencumbered. Always you felt that way with James, she realized. There was the world you lived in, and there was James. But once you got to James, the rest faded out, and James was all the world there was—a warm, safe, smiling world where you never did anything wrong, and even if you were stupid it didn't matter. There was no dark, either, where James was. The sun shone, as it was shining today, and the wind blew sweet against your face, and nobody hurried or was cross. And never, since they were children, she discovered with surprise, had they been so alone as they were now in the little car, with James's long, fine hands on the wheel—James's hands, and between them, as always, her very life. But never like this before, never so literally, never so openly had she seen herself delivered over to his wisdom and skill. It

was sheer ecstasy to sit like this while James drove—

Just here they came to a roundabout and a red light, and as the car slid to a smooth pause James glanced down at her sidewise with a comprehending smile.

"Tell me what you were thinking," he said gently.

"I guess I was thinking that if you chose to run the car into that lamp-post and smash me to bits I'd still be glad," she said simply, and added with a catch of the breath—"That sounds awful, doesn't it, I didn't mean—"

"I think I know what you mean." The light changed and he let in the gears and the car gathered speed again. "Last time it was the electric chair."

"I suppose what it all comes to is that if being with you means dying, I'd just die," she said, puzzling at it.

"Quite cheerfully."

"Yes."

"Well, not today, anyway," he said comfortingly. "Let's not die today, will we. Not before lunch."

In a state of abject happiness Sierra endured the prick of tears behind her eyelids without sniffing, lest he notice she was crying. And she wasn't crying, really, it was only because James always accepted everything she said as though it made sense, and it was difficult to get used to him again all at once, and it was so good just to hear his voice again, to burrow deeper into his mere presence, pulling it close all round her like an eiderdown, feeling it soft and warm and whispering, without draughts—

"If you cry," said James, with his eyes on the road ahead, "people will think I'm kidnapping you."

"I wasn't crying. Not exactly."

"I know," he nodded. "Just happy."

"Just happy."

"Me too."

The car sped on, into Buckinghamshire.

At last James drew up in front of an inn in a wide village street, and said, "This is where we eat. I bet you're glad."

And they did eat, with very good appetites indeed—thick grilled chops and tomatoes done to a turn, chip potatoes, country sausage, kidneys, and thin pink slabs of curly bacon, garnished with fresh water cress, on heavy blue-flowered plates, with a shining silver tankard of mild-and-bitter for James. The sweet was a fruit tart, lavishly served hot out of the large white baking-dish it grew in, with thick yellow cream from a glass jug.

While they ate she told him how she had once gone in a Cook's Tour bus to Eton as a pilgrimage, and his brows contracted with horror at the idea. And then he was talking to her as there had never been time to do before of what life was like to a boy at Eton, of other boys he had known there who were now doing something at the Foreign Office, or had stood for Parliament, or gone into something in the City, or, like Nannie, had come into responsible inheritances. For the first time, while she listened, she began to see the pattern of English living as he knew it; the dignity, the tradition, the continuity of it; the small ironies and the large jokes and the private tragedies in what is essentially a colossal family of rich uncles and poor

relations, from one end of the island to the other. James drew on everything he knew for her enlightenment, striving even in the smallest way to convey to her the solid, gracious, lovable England of his boyhood, the things it stood for in his grateful memory, the things he still found there, with satisfaction, on his return. Sierra listened eagerly, not just because it was James speaking, but because through his eyes she began to see something that was not Oakfield and the Dorchester—something strong and fine and earthy, with roots, something she could understand and feel at home with.

It was mid-afternoon when they came out again into the village street and James slid under the wheel.

"Any special place you'd like to go?" he asked.

"No—you choose. Let's go somewhere that you like."

"Well, now, let's see, where are we—" Thoughtfully he let in the gears, and thoughtfully he surveyed the signpost as they approached the next crossroads. "Flaunden," he read with satisfaction. "Chipperfield. Chenies. That's the stuff. That's what we want. That's England."

The car gathered purpose under his hands.

Along narrow, twisting, dipping lanes they went, through small red brick villages with cottage gardens and tidy low walls and blond children at sober-seeming play. The sun was warm and James was bare-headed since lunch, so Sierra pulled her hat off too and let the wind blow her pale hair back from her face till she looked like a child again.

James drove lingeringly now, giving her time to peep through garden gates and round corners, and catch the incurious, friendly eyes of the country people they passed by the roadside. He stopped at a village filling-station to buy petrol for the car, and went into an intimate consultation with the smiling boy in a dirty mechanic's suit as to the best way to get to Cambridge and where to have tea on the road, after which the boy was given a tip in coppers and expressed pleased surprise as they drew away.

"Did you *know* him?" puzzled Sierra, with a backward glance.

"Never saw him before in my life."

"But you talked to him as though you had. And so did he."

"What did you expect us to do? Make signs?"

Sierra reflected for a couple of miles on his peculiar one-ness with the gentle-voiced people of the bewildering island where she and Philip were still, after all, strangers.

"Are we going to Cambridge?" she inquired then.

"No. But I didn't know any other way to open him up for you. They like to give advice."

Before many more miles they came to where she could see a long dark building like a lion *couchant* against the country horizon. Green fields lay between it and them, with a fat white horse grazing in the foreground.

"What is that?" she asked, when she could bear his well-informed silence no longer.

"That is St. Albans Cathedral."

"I've never been to a cathedral."

"I was afraid of that," said James. "That's why we're going there."

He approached it informally from behind, and parked the car under the big yew tree where the drive ends, and reached across her to unlatch the door. She stepped out rather gingerly, grave and silent, with an awed upward glance at the massive red tower which loomed ahead. James slid out after her, and handed her her hat which she had left on the seat. The car door clicked behind him, and their footsteps were audible in the warm summer silence as they walked along the vast flank of the building to the great West Door. In the porch he paused and looked down at her, his hand on the door.

"Put on your hat," he said in a nursery whisper, like a nudge.

She obeyed with her usual docility, but as he pushed open the door before her—

"Why?" she queried anxiously, her eyes seeking his. "Why do I?"

"Women must cover their heads in church," he said.

"Why?"

Hatless himself, his face wiped clean of surprise, amusement, or derision, he met her puzzled eyes.

"Well, now you've got me. I don't know why. They just do."

With his own slow gaze he led hers to the solemn sweep of the nave before them, and heard with satisfaction the childish intake of her breath. For a moment they stood motionless, adjusting themselves.

Then, without glancing again in her direction, he moved forward and she followed him, down the center aisle. When they reached the screen he turned aside into the south aisle, and the great Norman arches of the crossing were before them.

He could no longer resist a stolen look at her face, and found it uptilted, oddly pure and pale in the filtered light, her mouth a little ajar like a stone saint at prayer.

"C-can we go along there too?" she whispered, pointing.

"Through the transept? Sure, come on. The Shrine is back there. I thought you might like to see that."

Dumbly she followed, staring up and around, taking a few steps backwards across the transept, and turning again to keep close to his side.

At the west wall of the chapel that day, facing the Shrine, stood three tall vases of blue delphinium, chaste against the gray stone.

"That's lovely," said James involuntarily. "Every year on St. Alban's day in June the children bring roses and pile them round the Shrine, but I never saw delphiniums here before. That's pretty clever of somebody."

"Who put them there?"

"Maybe the verger. Maybe the canon's wife. Anyway, it was a good idea. Did you happen to know that that particular shade of pale blue stands for man's immortality, Christian prudence, and a serene conscience?"

"No. I don't know anything. Who was St. Alban?"

"Well, let me think—he was the first Christian martyr in Britain, I remember that much. And—oh, yes, maybe you'd like this part: He lived here under the Roman rule, you see, at the time when Diocletian was persecuting the Christians. Alban wasn't a Christian himself to begin with, but he did shelter a priest in his house and got converted, so that when the Roman soldiers came and demanded the priest for execution, Alban put on the priest's robe and allowed himself to be taken away instead. The judge gave him another chance to give up the priest and deny his own conversion, but Alban refused and so they beheaded him. And later on, when the Romans had gone, the islanders built a church on the spot where he was supposed to have died."

There was a long silence. He waited expectantly. Sierra was thinking.

"I don't care much for the priest," she said finally, "to let another man die in his place."

"That's a point," James conceded gravely. "The Church would doubtless argue that Alban would have had to die anyway, once he turned Christian, but that priest does seem to have been something of a rat."

On the way out they passed a contribution-box and Sierra turned at the clink of the coin James had dropped into it.

"Why did you do that?"

"Well," said James apologetically, "you can't tip the Bishop, but you can drop something in there to help with the restoration and upkeep of the building."

"Can I do it too?"

"If you like."

"How much did you put?" she asked, opening her bag.

"A shilling."

"Is that enough?"

"Oh, all right, go on, be a movie star and put in half-a-crown," he grinned, and she listened contentedly to the bump of the heavy coin as it fell. "They'll probably drop dead when they find that," he said. "They're grateful for coppers these days."

In silence she followed him back to where the car waited under the yew tree.

"Well, now you've been to a cathedral," he remarked as he helped her into her seat and deftly removed her hat again and returned it to her.

"Do you know what I liked best of all?"

He paused, his elbows on the door he had just closed beside her, his face almost level with hers.

"No," he said in a whisper. "What?"

"The way the sun came through the stained glass and made little rainbows quite low down on the columns."

For a moment more he contemplated her, his elbows on the door.

"So you noticed that," he said then.

"Didn't you?"

"Always." Rather abruptly he went round to the other side of the car and slid under the wheel. His door slammed. "And now I think tea," he remarked, letting in the gears.

"James."

"Hullo?" He was absorbed in making the sharp turn to get them out of the drive.

"Are there more places like that?"

"More cathedrals? Lots of them."

"How many?"

"I don't think I know," he admitted in some surprise. "Two dozen—maybe more."

"Could I see them all?"

"I suppose you could—if you gave the rest of your life to it."

"But you wouldn't be there. And without you I wouldn't know what I saw. James, how can you bear to go round with anyone so ignorant as I am?"

He flashed a slanting glance at her, in the midst of St. Albans traffic.

"I'm doin' all right," he said.

James had thought of everything. Late teatime brought them to a limpid stream that flowed athwart deep wooded lanes, with lush islands of water cress, and level banks where thick grass grew. James pulled up the car well off the road, and produced a tea-basket and a rug, and they picnicked near the edge of the water in the shade of an ancient beech tree. There was hot tea in thermos bottles, and there were exquisite sandwiches in waxed paper and tin containers, and a thumping cake, and those mammoth sweet peaches you get nowhere else in the world but England.

When they had finished eating, James lay on his back in the grass beside the rug where she sat; lay looking up into the branches of the beech tree overhead.

"Now all we need is your concertina," he said softly. "You know, I've been thinking," he went on in a quite academic tone, before she could speak. "I've been thinking all day, and there's no getting round it, love is a funny thing. Now, take love at first sight. You hear a lot about that, pro and con, don't you."

"What do *you* think?" queried Sierra, with her usual defenseless interest in any topic he chose to embark on.

"Well, I'm beginning to believe in it," he admitted cautiously. "Because when all's said and done, you and I have fallen in love at first sight four times over—haven't we?"

Sierra considered.

"Or is it just the first time still?" she ventured.

"That one way to look at it," James agreed at once. "But nobody'd believe that, besides us. We'd never be able to convince anybody else that those three months together when we were twelve could be enough to account for this thing that's eating us alive today."

"We'd never get anybody else to believe that we knew anything about it at all when we were twelve," said Sierra, as usual accepting all debatable affirmations and replying at an angle to the main issue.

"We didn't. But that was love, all right," said James dreamily, his eyes on the leaves above him, deeply and comfortingly aware that she had no intention of fencing with him—his Sierra still, open and honest and not afraid of him, or of herself, willing to let him say what he liked, willing to answer in her own enchanting, muddled way, and never an *arrière-pensée* to her

name. "I can see you now, as you were that first day at the ranch. Gosh, you were cute. You had on blue denim pants, and your father's hat. You went right into the corral and caught that Monte horse for me and made him shake hands."

"You picked up my glove," said Sierra, her eyes wide and unseeing on the flowing stream at their feet. "Nobody'd ever done anything like that before. You had such lovely manners, Jamie—it always made me feel like a princess, the way you treated me. Nobody's ever made me feel so—so sort of *grand* as you could."

"Nobody?" he whispered, lying very still.

Sierra shook her head without speaking, and even though he was not looking at her, James knew.

"You must have felt pretty grand that time in New York," he reminded her, "singing at the Garden. It certainly gave me the shock of my life. Oh, I don't mean I'd forgotten anything about the tow-headed kid I was still trying to get back to. But you'd grown up, while I was away. That's what threw me for such a loss. Somehow I wasn't expecting that so soon."

"Grown!" cried Sierra, and laughed. "My goodness, hadn't you seen yourself lately?"

"Yeh, I know," he grinned. "I knew I'd changed, I was feeling pretty much aged myself, by then. But—"

"But it was still just us," she broke in urgently. "We hadn't changed towards each other. The minute I saw you again I—" She stopped abruptly, and her hand began to pull at the grass beside the rug.

"The old love," he said, confirming it. "Not a new

one. The same two people—the same love. Maybe so. And then that night in Hollywood—”

“You were still Jamie!” she cried, her head bent, her stormy eyes on the hand that pulled at the grass between them. “That was all I knew that night—you only had to say a dozen words—you only had to look at me, the way you do—there was nothing new about it, there couldn’t be, you were Jamie, and that was all I cared about, I was yours, I always have been yours, there wasn’t anybody else—ever—”

“And that brings us down to yesterday,” he pursued almost inaudibly, lying as though he watched a wild bird, afraid to move. “Yesterday, Sierra, at Oakfield—no change?”

Once more she shook her head silently, and once more without looking he knew.

“Each time we meet it happens,” he murmured. “First sight—fourth sight—what does it matter? Forty times—four hundred—we don’t stand a chance, do we. The cards are stacked. Any way you deal ’em, it comes out the same. James and Sierra are in love, and they’re going to stay that way for the rest of their natural lives. It doesn’t make sense—and it’s hell to live through. But we aren’t going to be let off, sweetheart, you might as well make up your mind to that. I’ve tried everything I know—but it’s no good. Nothing we can do now is any good, Sierra. You know that as well as I do—don’t you.”

“James,” said Sierra, following a perfectly clear and logical line of thought from his words to her own question, “do you have to go to Paris?”

"Mm-hm."

"And do you have to take Geraldine along?"

"No. But I might as well—mightn't I?"

"You mean you're going to m-marry her?"

"The only person in the world who would hate that more than I would is Geraldine," he stated flatly.

"Oh," said Sierra, sitting rather stiffly and staring straight ahead of her. "I see."

"I doubt if you do," James remarked gently.

"You—haven't asked her to?"

"My dear child, I don't have to ask her. I know. Geraldine doesn't marry penniless scenario writers, for one thing. And for another thing, she doesn't marry Americans. She would consider it very tactless, not to say childish, of me to suggest such a thing. And," he continued, with weariness in his tone, "James doesn't marry anybody but Sierra. There's a law about that, didn't you know?"

Not a sound came from Sierra, sitting on the rug within reach of his hand, staring at the stream.

"I'm sorry this came up, I never meant it to," he said. "Does it—do you mind, an awful lot?"

Still she made no reply, and he waited a full minute, his eyes on the green leaves which stirred above him.

"All right," he prodded. "Shoot. I've got it coming to me."

"Well, I was only thinking about what Philip said. He doesn't see how you handle that kind."

"Tell him," said James academically, "you just take them firmly by the throat—"

The silence fell again, unembarrassed, companionable, but full of thought. Then Sierra spoke again.

"How soon do you have to go?"

"Day after tomorrow. It's a good job, you know. They're going to make the English version right alongside the French one, and I've got the script work, right from the beginning, even the translation."

"You—you can speak French, then," said Sierra, chalking up another accomplishment for James.

"Mm-hm. Rondeau was so tickled about that, he forgot to squawk about the money I asked for. Sorry, I forgot you don't believe in money."

"James, how many languages do you know besides English?" she demanded, pursuing one of her tangents.

"French, mostly. I can get round in Italian, and I used to speak German quite well, before Hitler came in. I only had one year of Spanish, after I got to Princeton, I couldn't write it any more."

"Sometimes I think there's nothing you don't know," she said despairingly.

"There's Russian. All I know how to say in Russian is Yes, and I'd never want to."

Once more the drowsy silence enfolded them, so that the stream was audible at their feet, and bees in the late sunlight behind them. It was a moment achingly sweet and very fleeting, enclosed in their own indestructible magic of just being together in their own inviolable world where time did not matter, where Philip did not exist, and Geraldine could not intrude. James and Sierra. That was all.

"Sing me something," he murmured, motionless in the grass. "Or would that be asking too much?"

Obedient as always to his wish, her eyes on the clear water forever slipping past them, she began very softly:

"Sing me the songs I delighted to hear,

Long, long ago,

Long, long ago.

Tell me the tales that to me were so dear,

Long, long ago,

Long ago.

"Now you are come, all my grief is removed.

Let me forget that so long you have roved,

Let me believe—"

The song broke off. There was a quick rustle in the grass as James turned over, and saw her sitting with her hands before her face. While he watched, a tear fell past her shielding fingers.

Raising himself on one elbow, James reached out and pulled the hand nearest him down against his lips.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was my fault. That was stupid of me. Don't cry, darling, please—I'm sorry—"

She looked down at him round her wet fingers—at the long strength and beauty of the hand that held hers, at his brushed dark hair actually within her reach, at the curve of his lashes seen ridiculously from above. Her right hand that he had laid against his lips turned in his, caught his chin and brought it up, so that their eyes met.

"Nothing can make any difference to us—ever," she said, and bent and kissed him, a long, knowing, unhurried kiss.

When it ended, his eyes were full of wonder. The first move had been hers, the timing, too, was hers, and the reluctant withdrawal.

"Well, now you've told me something I couldn't ask," he said slowly. "Now we're getting some place."

"I haven't told you anything," she sighed. "You've always known that."

"It was a question of what you knew," he explained quietly. "Things are—a little clearer now."

"They're always clear enough. Just for me to be with you like this today is sinful, James—because I'm so happy with you, and everything else fades out."

"Nevertheless, today is not a form of sin which even the Admiralty Court would recognize."

"What's that?"

"The Admiralty Court? That's where they hear divorce cases in this country. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"No, I guess you shouldn't."

"Your home town of Reno, now," he suggested, "they're more obliging about those things."

For answer she only shook her head, staring at the stream. With another quick, rustling movement in the silence, he sat up, leaning over her.

"Sierra—"

"No, I can't," she said, and would not look at him. "It's worse now than it would have been that night in Hollywood. I can't just suddenly say to Philip after

three years, 'I'm sorry, but I belong to James Montgomery, good-by.' Can I!"

"No, I suppose you can't. Unless—"

"Even if he didn't love me, it must be so *humiliating* for a man to have his wife leave him—if he isn't in love with somebody else first, that is. I couldn't do that to a person like Philip—he cares so much about the *looks* of things."

"Couldn't we find him somebody else?"

"He says he's afraid of Geraldine!" she said, and giggled.

James's grin was an unholy thing to see.

"Well, we might look round for something a little easier, for Philip," he said. Their eyes caught, and held, and mirth went out of them. "Have you any idea what a really exceptional woman you are?" he said. "Have you any idea what unqualified hell anybody but you would be raising about Geraldine?"

"She dyes her hair, you know," she warned him, as one who imparts the Facts of Life, and with a sort of sob of laughter James gave up and caught her all anyhow into his arms, her face pressed against his necktie, his cheek against the top of her head.

"Oh, God Almighty," he prayed, and choked again on laughter, "Oh, God Almighty, give me strength!"

For a moment Sierra stayed very quiet, listening to the beating of his heart against her shoulder.

"I guess you'd better take me back to Town now," she said at last.

"I guess I had," he agreed without moving.

"Jamie—don't go to Paris."

His stillness was suddenly as though a clock had stopped ticking. Here it was again—the moment for James to decide, for James to make the wide-flung gesture, for James to snatch, and snatch quick and hard, at the thing he wanted more than salvation. Give up Paris, and all that went with it of his future—stay here in England, see her again, and again, bring pressure to bear, ever so skillfully, ever so ruthlessly, and keep her, forever, no matter how, in his arms. . . .

“You won’t like what I have to say,” he sighed, his lips in her hair.

“Don’t tell me it’s the money again!” she muttered, and stiffened in his hold.

“There is one thing you don’t realize,” he went on very quietly, and his encircling arms would not yield to her impatient movement so that she had to stay where she was, beneath his chin. “You mustn’t think it’s the roof over my own head that worries me—nor rows of little figures in a bank statement. My mother lost a very substantial income in the Crash. And then she behaved foolishly with what was left and most of that went, and she had a sort of breakdown. So each month I have to send her a check—if I send more than a month’s money it all goes, and if I send less she doesn’t have enough to last out. So each month I have to send off the same amount, to her bank in New York. And so you see I don’t dare get behind with what I earn, and therefore I can’t afford ever to throw away a job—like the one in Paris—because I might not get another one in time. And *that*, Best Beloved,” he fin-

ished lightly, "is How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin!"

"I'm sorry, Jamie."

"So am I. But there it is. And now, if you will remove yourself from my waistcoat pocket, I will attempt to get us back to Town."

His arms released her and he rose to his feet, pulling her up by one hand. Moodily she watched him close the tea-basket and stoop for the rug to refold it. While it was still in his hands she stepped close to him and caught at his sleeve.

"You'll come back?" she pleaded, her face lifted to his.

"Oh, yes—I'll come back."

"When?"

"Round Christmas time, or a little later."

"Jamie—promise to miss me sometimes!"

"Don't I always miss you?"

"Desperately?"

"Indescribably."

"Morning, noon, and night?"

"Let's not go into details."

"Oh, Jamie, remember today! Whatever happens in Paris, no matter how long you're there, no matter what becomes of me, *remember today!* This is something we can never be without again, these few heavenly hours together, we can keep them always, live them over and over again, nobody else can touch them, nobody need ever know they happened, they belong to us, and we belong to each other, nothing can ever change that, so long as we both remember today!"

The half-folded rug slipped to the ground at their feet, and she was in his arms.

Paris, said Asmilius, brooding. He must go to Paris. Then back to London. But she'll be gone. It's unrolling. We'll know soon. Very soon.

December 1, 1937.—Once again, there can be no letters between them. Once again, for James the writer, the peculiar agony of prohibiting the normal outlet of his pen, while day after day the things he longs to say to her dam up in his heart. It would be easier for James, no doubt, if now and then he could sit down and let go on paper, even if only to confide his daily doings to the one creature in the world he has ever felt the need to confide in, ask questions of, and maybe, in his cagey, slantwise fashion, boast to, just a little.

But doubtless his work will be all the more brilliant for the urgent necessity to put Sierra at once and completely out of the top layers of his consciousness. Self-denial is likely to give a keener cutting-edge to a man's soul which serves him well in the end. James, with his way to make and a front to keep up, is in no position now to mope over a lost love. And James, Asmilus warns me, is going to be a success in Paris. James is on his way up now. And that, Asmilus remarks with satisfaction, is going to be something to see.

I'm sorry to lose sight of James like this. I've grown uncommonly fond of him. If he was mine, I'm afraid I'd be more interfering than Asmilus, who is inclined

to let James set his own course. Or maybe Asmilius has learned that it's not much good trying to alleviate things for James. Not that I'm any too pleased with what I'm able to do about my own job right now.

Sierra for the first time has begun really to show that she feels a lack, so that even Philip has noticed that something seems wrong. For the first time she is making a conscious effort to be kind to Philip, to be gay, to live up to him. And gradually they both begin to realize how their way of life here has got out of hand. They are spending too much money, and Philip, especially since they first went to Oakfield, has got into the way of drinking a little too much. Hospitality is very free, and Philip is popular. The fact is, they have too many friends.

Philip would concede something of this sort quite cheerfully. But it's a pleasant sort of rut they've got into, and he likes it. More and more Philip sees himself as lord of the manor, on a fairly grand scale. What began as a vague ambition to end his days in style in a comfortable Georgian seat in the Home Counties has crystallized, as he passed from a dreamy weakness for the real estate advertisements in the front of *Country Life* to a more practical state of mind in which he called upon an agent or two and put his name down as being interested in houses with certain specifications. It seemed a harmless sport enough, even when it got as far as driving out to look at the houses themselves, and going into figures. It was a game even Sierra enjoyed playing, with reservations, for looking at empty houses and imagining what could be done to make them over

to suit your own ideas is a fundamental human failing.

There was one house they went back to several times, a square red brick Queen Anne place which stood on a wooded slope in Buckinghamshire and rejoiced in the name of Nollings. "What is a nolling?" Philip would inquire tirelessly.

Gradually as the game went on, Sierra felt a growing uneasiness. Philip really meant it. Philip had taken root in this bright, brittle life which she still found strange and a little boring.

When he finished the picture and they began to think of leaving Oakfield last autumn, she mentioned going home again, rather wistfully, and Philip said at once that he had to stay for the première. Sierra heard him with a sigh, knowing that there would be another offer by then to tempt him. She is less close to him now, less aware of what goes on in his mind. Even before James came to Oakfield the rift was there. But now Sierra sees it clearly, and is frightened, for without Philip's selfish, demanding love she would have nothing to warm herself at in this foreign land.

Nothing, that is, unless James should come back.

The idea of James's return has been haunting her day and night. Round about Christmas time, he said. She swings between impatience and dread. She longs for the sight of him again, and the sound of his slow, unemphatic voice. But even more she dreads the possibility of meetings like the one at Oakfield, with people looking on, with the necessity to hide what she feels, to speak to him casually or not at all, to keep her eyes from resting on him in abject worship, to let him leave

her again and again, a dozen little deaths, leave her with Philip. More and more she has become convinced that that sort of thing could not be borne.

The alternative, if not the corollary, to the above circumstances would be stolen repetitions of their day together in the car, always dominated by the weather and the desire not to be seen. So that being with James would become a difficult thing, a furtive, unspontaneous thing, until gradually it even got to be the sort of thing the Admiralty Court could take exception to. . . . And that became a nightmare.

Of course James himself might settle it by going back to Hollywood when he has finished in Paris. And then the Atlantic Ocean and all of America would lie between them again. And that is a prospect so bleak that it leaves her teeth chattering.

I don't know about James, but I do know it's time Sierra left England, and I have begun to crowd her gently towards that decision. Carelius, Philip's Angel, is really of very little use to me, as it appears that Philip will stay here, no matter what Sierra does. *Philip has taken a mistress*, says Carelius conclusively. *Her name is England. Later on there will be a Mrs. Wilson, a widow.*

Last night was the première of Philip's film, a very gala occasion, with Royalty present, and supper at the Savoy afterwards in an atmosphere of champagne and triumph.

This morning, or rather this noon, while they breakfasted in their dressing-gowns and read the reviews,

which were full of praise for everybody concerned, Sierra tried again.

"Philip—I've been thinking—let's go home for Christmas."

"Now, honey, you aren't going to start *that* again?" pleaded Philip, and passed his cup for more tea.

"Well—just a visit. Philip? Just to say Hullo, sort of? Just for Christmas?"

"What's the matter with Christmas here?"

"Nothing. Only—"

"Besides, I'm practically certain to sign up with Miklas before the week is out, now that this thing is a hit. And what a picture *that* will be!"

"But, Philip—"

"And you know what?" Philip continued, a little too brightly. "If I do get the Miklas picture, we'll buy Nollings! That'll keep you busy, won't it! A lot of the heavy furniture goes with it, of course, but we'll have to get our own drapes and things. That'll be fun for you, won't it? Every woman gets a kick out of fixing up a house she can call her very own!"

"Philip, please. I—I'd *rather* go home!"

For a moment they stared at each other, aware at last of the chasm that had opened between them—aware, and appalled.

"You mean, even if I bought Nollings you wouldn't want to live there?" he said incredulously.

"I want to go home," she repeated, fighting tears.

"Oh, my God." Philip pushed back his chair and rose to pace the room. cross as he was always cross, she knew now, if everybody didn't instantly fall in with

his plans. "Sierra, what's the matter with you lately? Aren't you glad to see me get on over here, so that Miklas himself practically puts out the red carpet for me? I like it here, all our friends are here, I'd feel like a fish out of water if I went back to America now! We're out of touch, we wouldn't know people—professionally, I daresay I'd be all right, my last two films have done very well out there. But socially we belong here now, we're getting to know the right people, and as soon as I get a place where we can really entertain—" He paused, looking down at her bent head in surprise and consternation. Sierra almost never cries. "Why don't you like it here, honey?"

"I don't know. I get homesick."

"Oh, nonsense, nobody can get homesick for Hollywood, it isn't that kind of a place!"

"Well, just for America, then—just to go back sometimes—"

"But it doesn't make sense, Sierra, you don't know a soul in New York, for instance, what good would it do to go there, you'd have to begin at the beginning!"

"Well, it's not just—knowing people, Philip, it's the *feel* of things," she said vaguely. "It's just the *feel* of being home again, I—don't know how to say it very well, but—"

"Well, if that's all it is, why don't you nip over there without me for a little while?" he suggested reasonably. "Have a good look round—buy some clothes in New York—fly out to Hollywood and see the Acklands. As a Christmas present from me, h'm? How would that be?"

"Couldn't you come too—just for a little while?"

"I suppose I could, but to tell the truth I don't care very much about it. I'd rather put my share of the money it would cost into the new house. But you go on, get it out of your system. I expect you need a change. You'll have to get a move on, though, if you want to make Hollywood by Christmas time. The *Normandie's* off in a few days, the Stanleys are booked on her. Why don't you join them?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind?" she asked, greatly tempted.

"Mind? Of course I mind, I'll miss your funny face!" He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "But don't you worry about me, you go and have a good time, and maybe it won't look so bad to you round here when you get back."

"Philip. Suppose I didn't come back."

"*What?*" He stood staring at her, very smart-looking in his silk dressing-gown, with slight bags under his eyes in the noonday light.

Sierra realized that she had opened a door now which she could never close again, and took refuge in humility and the guilty knowledge that she had failed him.

"I don't belong here," she said miserably. "I'm *afraid* of Nollings, it gives me an inferiority complex or something. If you really want to live there you ought to get somebody different from me to run it for you—somebody more suitable than I am."

"Sierra, you're talking like a parlormaid! I never—" He broke off, aghast. Sierra had put her head down on

her arm on the corner of the table, narrowly missing the cream-jug, and was sobbing out loud. Philip went over to her and laid his hands uncertainly on her shoulders. "Don't cry, honey—I never saw you cry like this before! What's the matter with you, Sierra, I never meant to hurt your feelings, I only said—"

And because she is so sorry for him that he isn't James and therefore never can understand what is the matter with her, she twisted round into his arms and cried on his dressing-gown, so that he needn't know she'd always loved James and was afraid to see him again as Philip's wife. And Philip petted her very tenderly and utterly without comprehension, and promised to ring up the steamship line himself and engage her passage on the *Normandie*, which was really big of him because he hates the telephone and always tries to put it off on to somebody else.

And somehow, in the general atmosphere of kissing the bump to make it well, which they both scrupulously preserved for each other during the few days which remained before she sailed with the Stanleys, nothing more was said about her never coming back at all—Philip avoiding it because he hoped she'd see things differently when she got back to America all alone, and Sierra because she couldn't bear his hurt surprise at the mere idea, and hoped perhaps Lorna Ackland would tell her what to do.

* * *

December 10, 1938.—Sierra is still here in Hollywood, living in the Acklands' best guest-room because they

can see no reason for her to go and live by herself, and because since the Austrian Anschluss last March they have been dead against her returning to England in any case, for fear of war.

She has still an indestructible affection for the man whose greatest fault after all was simply that he was not somebody else, and there was nothing in their three years of marriage to turn her against him. They have been corresponding, in so far as Sierra can ever be said to correspond, on an amiable wait-and-see basis, with no apparent idea of permanent separation or divorce.

Once she had asked James if she had to stay with Philip always, and he replied with those dreadful words from the marriage service which sounded even more irrevocable when James said them than when she had heard them first—*forsaking all others, so long as you both shall live*. But now she had in a way forsaken Philip, not for James, it is true, but for the Acklands, at least in a manner of speaking, and she had begun to notice with an interest not yet amounting to hope, that no skies fell.

Just as her always tentative mental probings had reached a point where it seemed almost possible to contemplate the idea that perhaps she needn't always stay with Philip after all, the Crisis of September, 1938, developed, and the threat of war in Europe impelled her to send a cable urging Philip to come home at once. When he cabled back to say that he was staying on at Nollings, she was sorry, but she did not take it as a personal snub. Nollings was his home. It had never been hers. And if he preferred to be with Nollings

than with her— The thought was like seeing a door ajar which you had supposed was locked.

The main nightmare in September for Sierra was, of course, the question, Where is James? So far as anyone here knew, he was not in America, and when last heard from (by a camera-man at one of the studios) was in Vienna at the time of the Anschluss. To Sierra, who never felt comfortable on the Continent anyway, just the idea that James might be anywhere near a Nazi uniform contains real terror, for James is unpredictable, and might do or say the wrong thing and end up in a concentration camp. If a Nazi officer were to shoulder James off the pavement, for instance, he would be almost certain to receive some fairly high-class rudery in return, and there goes James to Dachau, the rubber hose, and starvation.

Lorna Ackland does her best to discourage this morbid train of thought, but Sierra has been driven by her own forebodings to write to people here and there in England in order to ask for news of him. Apart from the man called Bill, who wrote back to say that he had heard James was in Italy somewhere, writing a book, she has had no satisfaction whatever until today, when a letter arrived from James himself.

Usually I mind the job I'm on and let the rest go. But I care about James. I care about him so much and so persistently that when I got hold of Asmilius at last I made him fill in for me the blank between James's setting out for Paris after that day on the river-bank and Sierra's next meeting with him many months later. And

just to keep things straight, I will account for James here and now, because the letter Sierra has received from him doesn't, after all, contain much information.

James, you will remember, was to be a success in Paris. So much so that he was kept on for another six weeks after the actual shooting of the film was finished in January 1938. (Incidentally, Geraldine Brett-Dawson did not go along, after all. Asmilius says darkly that there was an Awful Row—which I can well believe—and James won. But Sierra will never know or care.)

There was James, then, as it were footloose and fancy-free, with six weeks' extra pay in his pocket and the gnawing need of creative work in his soul. Very deliberately, on a well-thought-out budget (he has never been able to afford impulses) he planned a fortnight's holiday in Europe, casting back over some of his mother's old trails to see them again with his own eyes as against the memory of a boy in his teens. It would be, he thought, an interesting sensation. He was sure to get some stories out of it. And also it would prevent him from returning posthaste to London, which was what he longed most poignantly to do. James too foresaw and dreaded the complications of meeting Sierra there, however casually, under general observation. However, James cannot afford to be quixotic either, and to go home to America just at that time, sacrificing valuable business connections recently made in England and France, was to turn his back on an almost certain source of income merely to start hunting a job in New York or Hollywood. As long as

those associations continued to bring him work, and well-paid work, James had to stay and make the most of them. But first he would have this fortnight's holiday in Europe which appeared to be breaking up very fast.

He went to the Riviera, and to Monte Carlo, and beheld them with all the sensations of a friendly ghost haunting a whole world that was dead and gone. He went to Rome and Milan, and felt a little better, chiefly because of the newspaper censorship. Nobody in Italy knew enough of what was going on across the Brenner Pass to be depressed. Then he went to Vienna.

On the day he arrived there, a Friday, the streets were littered with leaflets dropped on behalf of the proposed Schuschnigg plebiscite, the once-forbidden Nazi emblem was visible everywhere, and the air was supercharged with tension. On Saturday morning he was awakened by the drone of German bombers overhead, dropping other leaflets of which the last two words were "Heil Hitler." Later in the day he watched columns of German troops march into the city from the airports, and when he saw their eyes, under the arrogant squared German helmets, James felt very sick indeed, and he went back to the hotel as fast as he could and quietly gave up his lunch in cold and shaking privacy.

During the next few days he saw and heard—James is nearly as much at home in German as he is in French—some of the worst that can happen in a city full of Jews under Nazi rule, and twice in the name of common humanity he gave away all the money he had on

him, risking very considerable unpleasantness with the new authorities each time. But none of that made him as sick as the eyes, because in them he had seen the end.

Finally he crossed the Brenner again into Italy, and sat down in a hotel in Milan and began to write. After a long time he came to, a little, and crossed the border into France, where he went to a hotel in Grasse, and wrote. At the end of April, looking dazed and ill and sleepless, he stepped out of a plane at Croydon and somehow got himself back to Half Moon Street and went to bed and slept the clock right round.

For the first time in history he had missed sending his mother's check. His bank account was lower than he had ever meant it to be again. And nobody would buy the things he had written about the Anschluss, because by then everybody was talking about Czechoslovakia.

During May and June he worked on a rather second-rate picture with no pretensions to such surroundings as Oakfield. In July he re-wrote the libretto of a musical show which was coming into the West End. He was aware by now, of course, that Sierra had gone back to America for a visit, and he was also aware of Philip, master of Nollings, a little on the loose.

He spent part of August in a Cornish fishing village with a young married couple from one of the studios, and while there he wrote and sold a short story which had nothing to do with the Anschluss, and it was about this time that he stopped having bad dreams every night. When he returned to Town in September things

looked definitely ominous about Czechoslovakia, and the exodus of Americans had begun.

James knew that he ought to think of going home himself, because if there was a war there probably wouldn't be much of his sort of work asking to be done, and he wouldn't be able to earn enough to send his mother a check every month. Then it occurred to him that he might get a job as foreign correspondent, and he wrote several letters to inquire about this, enclosing some of his Anschluss material along with them. The writer in him longed to stay on in this strange twilight before the gathering storm, and besides—unlike those Americans who were crowding the cots of liners filled to what was euphemistically called Capacity—he was willing to share on an equal footing with the beleaguered English whatever was going to happen to England.

Day by day, as the Crisis mounted, he patrolled the streets and restaurants and shops of London, looking, listening—waiting. He saw the empty aisles of the big stores, the empty tables of restaurants only a short time ago garrulous and gay. He stood in the crowd in Downing Street that watched Chamberlain set out for Berchtesgaden. He watched them digging trenches all night long in the Parks by the light of lorry headlamps. He knelt beside an old man and a little boy at the Silent Intercession in Westminster Abbey. Busmen, taxi drivers, the men who sold newspapers, the women who sold flowers, disabled veterans singing for pennies in the gutters, all spoke their minds freely under his tactful manipulation. He saw a nation, a great and

homogeneous nation, with its back against the wall and a jest on its lips, waiting while the statesmen played out their deadly game of chess. That dull ache near the pit of his stomach was his heart.

On Tuesday the 27th of September, as requested by the authorities, he went to be fitted with a gas-mask and carried it home in his hand, like every other resident of London—the little brown boxes came later. It was lying on the table in the living-room of his flat when his dinner came up on a tray. The BBC, which had finished its six o'clock news broadcast, was giving them a little cheerful music.

"I see you've been and got one of those things too, sir—think they'll be much good to us?"

James put down his evening paper and contemplated the waiter affectionately. It was always the same man, a spare little blue-eyed cockney with deep laughter-lines down each cheek.

"Nobody knows," he replied matter-of-factly. "Have you got any children, Patten?"

The man's face changed, and softened.

"I 'ave, sir. Two little girls. One's only a baby, you might say, five months. My wife ain't—'asn't never been really well since the second was born. Very young my wife is, sir—only turned twenty last month."

"I see," said James, and looked very thoughtful. "Have you made any—arrangements for them?"

"No, sir, I 'aven't. Ethel—that's my wife, sir—she only starts to cry every time anybody says anything about evacuation. She won't leave 'ome, sir, that's wot

it comes to, she don't want us to be separated. If the time comes that I 'ave to join up I don't know 'ow she's going to take it, sir, and that's a fact."

"No people of her own?" queried James, so quietly that Patten answered without realizing he had been questioned.

"No, sir. She's alone in the world, you might say, except for me. That was wot got at me in the beginning, I think sometimes—'er being so on 'er own as you might say, and so young too, and not very strong—no wife for a poor man like me, she always says, but she's 'ad enough to eat since I got 'old of 'er, I will say that, sir."

"If I could find a really nice place for her to go and take the children," said James thoughtfully, "a place where she wouldn't feel evacuated and which wasn't too far for you to go and see her sometimes—would she go?"

"Well, sir, it's very kind of you, I must say—" The man's eyes filled with tears.

"I'll ring up one or two places I know, and if I get the right sort of thing, and I think I can, you'd better put your foot down—as a husband, you know. Tell her she's got to go."

"It's very good of you to take the trouble, sir—"

"It's no trouble," said James. "I know several people who have big places in the country where there might be room. Mind you, I'm not sure they'll be any safer in the country than right here in London—if this thing really starts, nobody is going to be very safe anywhere,

we may as well face that. But I'll ring up one or two of my friends and see what I can do."

"Thank you, sir." Patten paused uncertainly in the doorway on his way out. "I think I ought to mention, sir—about the baby—she cries a lot, you know, sir."

James lifted an innocent blue gaze from the copy of the *Spotlight* where he was beginning to hunt out phone numbers.

"I thought all babies cried," he said.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Patten went.

The first house James called was regretfully full up with refugee relatives. The second was being turned over to a school. (The telephone service was over-taxed that night and all this took time, while his dinner cooled on the table.) James pondered a moment over the numbers he had culled from the *Spotlight*. Then, with one eyebrow a little higher than the other, he made his third call, and after a surprisingly short interval got Philip's voice on the other end.

"This is James Montgomery," he said distinctly. "I don't know if you remember me, I used to know your wife in Hollywood—"

Philip said at once that he remembered him perfectly.

"That's very remarkable," said James. "Now, first of all, I hope Sierra is still in America and safely out of all this?"

Philip said she was, as a matter of fact, in Hollywood.

"I'm certainly glad to hear that," said James, which

was very true. "Now, I have rather an odd request to make, but these are odd times. Is your house full up, or could you make a little more room?"

"Why, we're fairly full up—or will be by tomorrow," said Philip, sounding a little puzzled. "But we're not what one would call packed out, by any means. I'd be delighted to put you up. When do you want to come?"

"No, now, wait a minute," James said hastily. "It's not me, it's a woman and two small children. Babies, in fact."

"Oh," said Philip, more at sea than ever. "No nurse?"

"No nurse. It's the family of the man who looks after me here at the flat. They're rather special people, and I'm very anxious to help them if I can."

"Why, certainly, old boy, I quite understand," Philip assured him cordially, very lord-of-the-manor. "We'll take care of them for you, gladly."

"That's awfully nice of you. Will it be all right if I bring them down tomorrow afternoon?"

"Whenever you like!" said Philip hospitably. "You know, I'd be quite able to fit you in here yourself, if you—"

"Well, thank you very much," James said politely, "but I think I'll just sit it out here in Town. Oh, by the way—I understand the baby cries a lot."

"Poor little devil's probably hungry," said Philip. "We'll fix that."

Then they hung up, with expressions of mutual esteem.

Wednesday was the day the British Parliament was

to meet—and it was generally supposed that before the House rose that afternoon the order for general mobilization would have been given. James spent the morning in the West End, walking, watching, listening. Sandbags were changing the familiar contours of London. Traffic was encumbered with Territorial units and Anti-Aircraft units in heavily loaded trucks. But everybody went quietly about their business—waiting.

Standing in the crowd at Westminster, James saw the Ministers into the House for the Session, and then drove his car to an address in Paddington where he collected the youthful Mrs. Patten (who looked extremely pretty in a blue straw hat until she smiled) and two very clean infants aged eighteen months and five months respectively—and drove them down to Nollings in Buckinghamshire.

There was no sunshine in England that day, but the countryside in its rich blue-greens and cool grays had never looked lovelier to James's eyes. Road traffic was not terribly heavy. A few cars with luggage and prams tied on outside had rather a holiday aspect. James followed for a while the same route that he and Sierra had taken to that picnic tea on the river-bank—past the same roundabout where she had said she wouldn't mind dying if it meant being with him. A whole year had passed since she had said that—the year of the Anschluss. And all James felt was thankfulness that it was not Sierra who sat beside him now, on the way to Nollings and a very problematical safety. Still in Hollywood, Philip had said quite casually. Would that by any chance mean—? Was it possible, James wondered,

that he was losing track of things? Wouldn't it be a good idea to look into this? If there wasn't a war . . .

It was quite late in the afternoon when the wheels crunched on the graveled carriage sweep of the house where Sierra might have been living, and, by the grace of God, wasn't.

Little Mrs. Patten stole a glance at his unrevealing face, seeking reassurance—it was flustering to her to arrive so grandly at the front door. And just then the baby, who had been asleep since Uxbridge, woke up and began to wail again.

"Is this the place?" she asked timidly, almost hoping that it wasn't.

"This is it," James assured her cheerfully, and then Philip, lord of the manor, came to the door and welcomed them, quite literally, with open arms.

"This is fine!" said Philip heartily. "Come right along in, I'm delighted to see you! And what's the matter with *you*?" he demanded playfully, and poked the baby in the ribs with his forefinger.

To everyone's surprise, the baby stopped crying in order to stare at him resentfully with streaming eyes. The older child, from its perch on James's shoulder, surveyed its new home with an expression of smug approval.

"Say How-d'ya-do to the kind gentleman," Mrs. Patten admonished the baby in helpless embarrassment, during the loud silence which ensued.

But the baby continued to eye Philip with a kind of baleful abhorrence, and one of James's eyebrows had gone higher than the other as Philip ushered his guests

inside and turned all of them but James over to a sympathetic-looking middle-aged parlormaid.

"Come and have a drink," Philip invited with visible relief, when they had seen the last of little Mrs. Patten's incoherent gratitude, and she and her offspring, one still smug and one still cherishing a grievance, disappeared behind a green baize door. "Or tea's still on, if you'd rather."

"Thank you," said James. "I would like a cup of tea."

"The Frintons are arriving tomorrow morning," Philip explained as they entered the drawing-room, "and the Kirkes are already here."

James recalled hastily that he already knew the Kirkes, and was then introduced to a Mrs. Wilson, who sat behind the tea-table with her hat on. It developed that she lived ten minutes down the lane and had just dropped in. She was a rather lovely creature, with soft fair hair turning gray, and tired blue eyes. James liked her at once, and had two cups of tea. Her husband had been killed in 1918, he learned, from something that was said. She never tried to conceal this fact, as she knew quite well that it only called attention to the other interesting facts (a) that she looked very young to have been married in 1918, and (b) that it was very odd she had never married again.

When James set down his cup and rose to go, Philip suggested that the BBC news broadcast was due soon and he had better wait for it. And so they went on making another ten minutes' pretty futile conversation

until the six o'clock time-pips sounded and silence closed over the room.

Thus it occurred, most strangely, that James and Philip stood side by side during that first staggering moment of reprieve when the announcement was made that there would be a Four-Power conference at Munich.

"Well," said James finally, while Philip poured out stiff whiskeys for everybody, "at least it won't start tomorrow."

"But you think it will start some time," said Mrs. Wilson, her eyes shrewdly on his face.

"It will start," he said quietly, and lifted his glass to the company. "How," he murmured, and drank.

"Well, now, maybe it won't after all," argued Philip when he had returned the salute. "Chamberlain's no fool. Maybe the old boy will really bring something off this time."

"No harm in hoping," said Kirke.

But somehow their eyes all waited on the tall, thin figure of James, who stood among them, a stranger, gazing down with melancholy interest at the amber liquid in his glass.

"It would be better if we didn't hope," he said unwillingly, into that attentive silence. "I saw them come into Vienna." He raised his guarded blue gaze a moment to Mrs. Wilson's tired, lovely face. "Better not waste time hoping," he told her in his most gentle voice, and finished off the stiff drink at a draught.

When he left the room a few minutes later to begin the long drive back to Town alone, he noticed that

Mrs. Wilson's hand had crept into the crook of Philip's tweed-clad arm.

PEACE, said Friday morning's headlines. NO WAR: *Official*. The dreadful compromise had been made at Munich.

By that time, an Idea had laid hold of James's consciousness and he had begun to write.

He worked cautiously now, almost stealthily, as it were on tiptoe, with a pencil and pad, as though fearful that the clatter of the typewriter might interfere with the delicate mechanism inside his head which was dictating to him, slowly, relentlessly, hour by hour, while his meals went almost untasted and his beard grew, the precious, fleeting words he was catching on paper.

At Milan, and again at Grasse, he had written at white-heat, in a ferment and a fever, scattering pages all over the floor, ripping them into fragments for the waste-paper basket, savagely wadding them into balls which missed the open fireplace they were aimed at.

But this new manuscript grew tidily in a pile at his elbow, closely written and interlined in his neat script. This time he worked in a kind of icy fourth dimension of detachment, calmly, steadily, his pen driven by a collected, clearly thinking brain which solved each minor difficulty of construction as he came to it, and indeed seemed to run ahead of him to open doors and turn out cupboards, making sure he missed nothing as he went.

Finally he came to the end, and slept the sleep of exhaustion before sitting down again to type it all out,

and when that was done he set to work methodically to disfigure the freshly typed pages with innumerable marginal notes and rewritings. Then he typed it again. And again the fresh pages became indecipherable to any but the parent-eye, as he snipped and polished and pared and tightened and rewrote, until each sentence was as clean as the hound's tooth and about as sharp, and each page marched close on the heels of its predecessor—while the whole thing shimmered with pitiless wit and echoed with innocent laughter until suddenly, you never knew how, you found yourself in tears.

Then he typed it again, very beautifully and lovingly, and took it to a play-broker he knew in Piccadilly.

After that, like a man returning from a long journey, he took stock of things. First of all he found that if he had intended to make the first boat out of Southampton for home—he wasn't sure he had so intended, but *if* he had—well, by the time he subtracted two months' living for his mother from his bank balance there was barely enough left to buy passage on a very undersized boat, and nothing at all for three thousand miles of railroad fare. Secondly, he found a mild sort of peace-boom going on all round him. Thirdly, he began to ring up people who were all very surprised that he was still in England, and who asked him at once to come and have a drink and maybe they might fix up something. And fourthly, within a week's time he had fixed himself up to do another picture at Oakfield at a nice round sum—traveling expenses.

And it was at Oakfield one day, in one of the spa-

cious lounges with a coal fire burning on the hearth, that he allowed himself the rare luxury of an impulse—or was it something he had been meaning to do for days disguised as an impulse?—and wrote that brief discreet letter which arrived today and caused Sierra to look, Mrs. Ackland observed unhappily to her husband, like a schoolgirl with a valentine:

DEAR SIERRA—

Well, here I am at Oakfield again, but there is no tea-party on the terrace this afternoon. June has become December with a vengeance. (I know—don't tell me—it was July.)

For once in my life I was glad you were on the other side of the Atlantic, for a while last September. I have never yet seen you look frightened, and I hope I never will, and those were very frightening days. As you probably heard, I saw Philip during the Crisis—saw him twice, in fact, once when I took the Patten family down to him for safe-keeping, and once when I went to bring it away again. He looked very well, and Nollings is a beautiful house, there's no getting round that.

I almost thought that the Crisis had made a playwright of me, but nobody else seems to think so, as far as I know. In spite of the fact that in my script no bombs fall, everybody who reads the play calls it "grim" and is therefore scared to death of it in the general holiday spirit which attempts to prevail here in the face of grave and disturbing knowledge of the facts. There is going to be a war, Sierra, I'd stay in Hollywood if I were you. I even expect to come back

there myself when this job is done. I don't offer that as any inducement, you understand, but only as proof that I believe in my own prophecies. People like me, who depend on the frivolous fringe for a living, won't be wanted here once the bombs begin. I would like to stay on as a special correspondent, but I can't find anybody to take much interest in that idea either.

In any case, you might let me know here what your immediate plans are, if any. Are you working again, or what?

Yours,

JAMIE

P.S.—Maybe I ought to say that the play script I mentioned isn't at all grim, really—only by implication and in the troubled imagination of the audience does it become terrifying. You are not in it, nor am I—but its title is "Remember Today." I hope you have no objection, for it was you who said it first, that day on the river-bank—which I have never forgotten, as you can see.

J.

To which Sierra, wrestling once more with pen and paper, contrived the following reply:

DEAR JAMIE—

It was simply wonderful to hear from you again, I nearly went crazy wondering about you during the Crisis. Philip clean forgot to mention that he had seen you. Of course he had no idea how much it mattered to me.

I don't know quite how to tell you this, so I guess I'll just have to plunk it down. I'm not coming back to England. This doesn't mean I've *left* Philip, exactly, we didn't quarrel or anything like that, but he wants to live at Nollings and I just can't bear to, and Lorna says I can stay here with them as long as I like. It doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?

Things are pretty mixed up too about my ever working again. My contract has finally expired, so I don't owe the studio anything, but they say the style of pictures changed while I was away, and admit frankly that they wouldn't know what to do with me now. And nobody else seems at all anxious to try and sign me up, for one reason or another. So I guess I'm just a has-been. I don't care very much, not the way Philip would if it was him that had been shelved. I only wish I'd saved up a little more while I was earning—I expect you're surprised to hear anything like that from me!—but Robbie Ackland says that thanks entirely to him and nobody else I'll always have enough to live on if I'm good, without having to ask Philip for anything, at least while we're separated.

Well, that's enough about me, I was very excited to hear you had written a play. Maybe if there's a war they will realize how good it is, but Robbie says if there is one they will probably have to close all the theaters. Couldn't you turn it into a film? How long do you have to stay there? I wish you would come back now while it's safe. Robbie says no passenger liner will be safe once war is declared, because of submarines. He told me all about the *Lusitania* last night

at dinner before Lorna could stop him, and I had bad dreams about you. Can you swim? Isn't it funny how I don't know things like that about you? Oh, Jamie, please come home.

Your loving,
SIERRA

You can imagine what that letter did to James. *I'm not coming back to England.* It was enough to make him start packing his bags at once, and he might even have done so if he hadn't been well into the job at Oakfield by that time. You don't walk out on a film. Not, at least, until you have collected your full guarantee, which in this case meant March. *So I guess I'm just a has-been.* Did she mind, more than she admitted? He would never know till he saw her. *Can you swim?* Oh, Sierra! No matter how many times and how tenderly he read and reread her letter, it always brought him laughter.

March came at last, and James booked his westward passage for the twentieth, and began to pack his trunk. With the lengthening shadow of war over Europe, it was no longer taking such a chance to go home to find a job, either. People he had worked with successfully in London and Paris had already gone back. He had connections in Hollywood now. He would be able to find something to do there before very long. He wondered—still very cautiously—if by any chance he was beginning now to see his way out of the wood. . . .

On March 15th German troops crossed the hypothetical borders of the Czech rump state and occupied

the weeping city of Prague. On the 16th the play-brokers in Piccadilly rang up James and said that public feeling was changing and with it managerial opinions about what the public wanted to see. The best of the several suburban try-out theaters wanted to do his play—at once. If it was successful there, the West End production would follow early in the summer.

With his eyes on the trunk which stood open in the room, James said Yes to everything very quietly and made an appointment to go in and sign the contracts and talk about casting. Then he rang up the steamship line and canceled his booking. Then, resisting the desire to cable, he sat down and wrote to Sierra and tried to explain why he was staying a little longer. He had no real hope she would believe him when he stated that nobody made much money out of a try-out theater, and that money, for once, had very little to do with it.

I never thought I'd bring it off, Asmilius confessed to me later. That was one time I bore down on hard.

July 3, 1939.—We have had another letter from James this morning, written from Paris. Sierra has read it at least a dozen times, and apart from the single shining fact that once more James is on the point of starting home, she comprehends very little of it.

“Remember Today” is a success. Not even James’s modest account of what has happened about his play can conceal that. James has Arrived. From the newspaper cuttings he enclosed, and a careful scrutiny between the lines of this letter, and the implications of his trip to Paris, it is possible, if you are not Sierra, to piece together a fairly clear idea of what James has done and what it is going to mean to him.

James has written one of those rare stories in which each reader, each member of the audience, sees himself or those dearest to him, mirrored, moving, and alive. With a terrible simplicity, a gentleness much more dreadful than tub-thumping, and a sympathy too deep for tears, he has shown one summer day in the lives of a few people who might have had their home in almost any country not yet dominated by Germany—shown what they did and said and thought and felt, as the shadow of war crept towards them. No bombs drop,

as he told Sierra, during the few hours in an English home revealed by his script. No gun is fired, no uniforms appear, nobody goes off to war—before the final curtain falls. And that is probably the most insidious aspect of the gripping thing he has written. For the people he has conjured up have lives of their own, off stage. They will go on living, after the curtain is down. And you know as well as they do that one day the bombs will drop, the country tweeds and flannels will become khaki and white linen—one day they will go to war.

And so be happy *now*, before the world splinters and takes fire, says James, during this one day in their lives. Catch and hold each present hour, turn it slowly in loving, careful hands; learn it, try to comprehend it, overlook nothing of its beauty. It is immortal if you make it so, and it will outlast the shadow that lies across it. It will survive disaster and anxiety and separation and destruction. It is yours, as long as you go on breathing, yours to remember. No matter what comes after, let us remember today, for it may be the last we can bear to look back on for a long time to come. Remember today, for tomorrow it may be too late ever to fashion another day like it. Remember today, with sunlight over the garden, and children and dogs playing on the lawn, gay voices and the plonk of balls from the tennis court, pink roses in a crystal bowl, and the vicar coming to tea. Remember today, while there are still hands to hold and lips to kiss. Remember today, while we are still young and free. Remember today. . . .

Even the critics were touched and troubled by the thing James has written. "—civilization stripped down to its clean fundamentals—miraculous understatement—as tender a piece of vivisection as the stage has ever seen—urgent youth exulting in the hours it still has left to live—exquisite swan-song of a brave world condemned to war—laughter that chokes you with tears—" It can be seen that the critics quite forgot themselves in bewildered praise.

No one, however, is any more bewildered than James. He liked his play, to be sure, he thought it stood a decent chance of running, and it said something that he very much wanted to say—or he would never have canceled that steamship booking. James had the writer's honest regard for his own handiwork. He wanted his play to have the best possible chance for a hearing, and so he stayed in England to look after it. But he was telling the truth when he wrote to Sierra that he didn't expect to make much money out of it. Unless—there was naturally no overlooking the Unless—it went into Town and did good business there. And when he found people standing up at the back to see it, when it broke all records for a second week at the try-out theater, when the West End bidding opened one of the most famous theaters in London to it, and there the House Full sign went out each night—James began to look a little dazed.

Paris asked for a translation, and he offered to rewrite it in French with a French background. This he did, in a remarkably short time, to everybody's stupefaction. That is why he went to France. It is in re-

hearsal there now, and he plans to sail—from Southampton—the middle of this month. He has to go back to London first, because there is some talk of a New York production in the early autumn. And we will hear from him again, he promises, as soon as he arrives in America.

P.S. There is still going to be a war.

* * *

August 31, 1939.—There was of course some delay in London. James did not arrive in New York until early in August, and a week or so later we received more particulars.

He crossed on the *Queen Mary* with the transatlantic impresario named Russell who is going to put "Remember Today" on Broadway. (James adds with a perfectly straight face that they will use the English version.) They cast and produced it all the way over, during long, exciting, confidential sessions in the bar. Yes, even James is excited now. At first he was able to tell himself that it was only a suburban theater after all. Then he was still able to remind himself that it was only London—well, only London and Paris. Even now, he has not lost sight of the fact that plays which are a success in London often fail dismally in New York. He has by no means begun to appreciate yet what is happening to his hitherto under-nourished bank account. But he had just enough sense not to dispose of the film rights before the New York production goes on.

Russell, who saw the play three times in London and

wept without shame each time, has got to a point where he will hardly let James out of his sight for fear something will go wrong somehow, nobody knows what. And James, looking rather patient around the mouth, I expect, has taken a quite unostentatious apartment overlooking Central Park from the west, and finds, though he is a little uncertain as to just how it came about, that his mother is sharing it with him. But it doesn't matter much to a man involved in a Broadway production who is living in the same apartment, because he sees very little of his home.

Sierra, to whom James's safe arrival on the right side of the Atlantic is of even greater importance than the success of his play, is in such a state of radiant happiness that, as Lorna Ackland remarked, the letter which came from Philip this morning was almost an anticlimax. But, as Lorna also remarked, Not Quite.

Once Sierra had assimilated its contents, she sat down at the writing-table in the Acklands' guest-room with a furrowed brow and a beating heart, and after much labor began as follows:

DEAR JAMIE—

I know you said you would be awfully busy till after the opening and not to expect much from you in the way of letters, but something has happened and I think I ought to let you know about it at once because—

At this point she came to a dead stop for fully three minutes, having wound herself up in a sentence she

found too embarrassing to finish. So she tore up the page and began again.

DEAR JAMIE—

I'll try and make this as short as possible because I know you're busy these days, but I think I ought to tell you that Philip has asked me to get a divorce. He wants to marry a Mrs. Wilson, a widow, who has a house near Nollings, and they have been doing ARP work together. He says that especially if there's a war he feels his place is there with her.

In a way this is a great relief to me, because it seemed too bad for Philip to have to go on living at Nollings all alone, and—

Here again she came to a full stop, which she finally solved by crossing out the "and" and putting a period after "alone." She was then able to continue.

Robbie says mine will be one Reno divorce that's legal, because Mom left the ranch to me, and I can easily establish residence there. (It only takes six weeks to get a divorce now, did you know?) So I am leaving here in a few days and will stay at a hotel in Reno till I can get the ranch house opened up and somebody to stay there and look after me. Lorna says she will go up with me for a while, as the place has very tender memories for her owing to the fact that she did *not* get a divorce.

I thought I might see about putting in a couple of new bathrooms, if what Robbie calls the Exchequer

will run to it, but I will tell you more about that later on when you have more time to hear about it.

I expect you will be pretty surprised at this letter, I am, myself, but of course Philip and I couldn't go on like that forever, Lorna says it wasn't human nature. She has been trying to get me to start a divorce myself, and I did have some idea of it, only now that war looks so certain it seemed like backing out, somehow—I wonder what she's like.

Well, when you write to me now it will be the good old address—Bar X again. It doesn't seem possible, does it. Looks as though we were right back where we started from.

Your loving,

SIERRA

She regarded the last sentence dubiously for some seconds, because it certainly did sound like hinting, and now that James was so famous perhaps things would be different, and it wouldn't do to seem to take things for granted, even though— But finally she folded the letter and put it in the envelope and went down to the letterbox at the corner herself to post it, bareheaded in the California sunshine.

We now await, in a dither, James's reply.

Because we were still awaiting a reply from James nearly three weeks later, right up to the night of the New York opening, I must refer to the story I got from Asmilius when we finally met again.

If James did not yet appreciate the implications of

his position, his mother did. She is still a pretty woman, remarkably so for her age, and she still has the gay little futile ways which so enchanted two husbands and have infuriated James for the past twenty years. She is as proud of James as a child with a new toy, now that he has returned from abroad trailing clouds of glory, and she spends a great deal of energy and ingenuity in trying to trap him into appearing before her envious friends and the people who are always longing to meet a real live playwright. James remains scrupulously polite, but elusive.

The first real dust-up between them occurred quite naturally on the first of the month. James got home late on Friday night, September 1st, and sat down at his desk to make out the rent check, and found an untidy pile of crumpled bills thrust in among the unopened envelopes of his personal mail.

James was tired as only theater work can make a man tired, and tense with the growing threat of war which had penetrated even that most self-centered of all human microcosms, a play rehearsal. He turned to his mother, who sat in a corner of the sofa doing a piece of French needlework and looking very picturesque, she was well aware, in a new house-coat with her hair freshly done.

"Why do you wish these on to me?" he inquired mildly enough. "Haven't you got enough in your own account to pay them?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, dear, I did run over a little bit this month. I got some new clothes in honor of your homecoming, for one thing, and—"

"But a lot of these are overdue," he discovered with surprise. "In fact, a lot of them are duns. How does that happen?"

"Oh, James, you aren't going to be stingy about things, now that you're making so much money?" she entreated.

"I hope not, but I gave you some extra money a little while back, and it does seem as though you might have—"

"Now *don't* make a fuss tonight, please, James—my head aches!"

"Well, as far as that goes, so does mine," said James. "Look, mother—let's get this straight right now. I have made some money, yes, and presumably I own a valuable property in the play. But we don't know that. Plays can fail, you know. This one may take an awful beating over here, we don't know yet."

"But in London and Paris—"

"If there is a war, and I'm afraid there will be soon, the theaters in London and Paris will be closed. And if they aren't, the English and French royalties of the play will be paid straight over to the Red Cross."

"*All* that money?"

"All that money."

"But it *will* be a success here, James, it's bound to be!"

"Maybe it will. Maybe there will be quite a lot of money from it eventually. But that doesn't mean that we're going to spend much more than we do now."

"But, James—"

"You may as well understand, mother, that just as

soon as I can see my way ahead, financially, I'm going to move heaven and earth to marry Sierra."

"Marry *who*?"

"Sierra. The little girl from Reno who became a film star. Remember?"

"But I thought— Whatever became of her?"

"She was in England, for a while. I saw her there. Now she's in Hollywood again. Just as soon as this play is on, even if it's a flop, I'm going out there and— see what I can do."

"I thought she married somebody."

"She did. But they've been separated for more than a year. He's bought a house in England and prefers to live there."

"He won't if there's a war," she said wisely.

"Strangely enough, that had already occurred to me."

"What if he comes back, then?"

"I'll take her away from him—this time—if I can."

"James, *darling*, what a dreadful thing to say!"

"Yes, I suppose it is, at that," he agreed with a sigh, and passed a hand wearily across his aching head. "The point is, mother, I can't have any more overdue bills piling up like this. I will always try to give you an adequate allowance to live sensibly on, as I always have. The rest, whatever it comes to, is for Sierra, from now on."

"Oh, James, and I'd planned it so differently!"

He looked surprised.

"Planned what?"

"Our life, now that we're going to be rich again. I

thought we could take a really nice place over on Park Avenue, and I could give little dinners for you, and we'd get to know the people that really mattered. This Sierra girl of yours—would she fit in?"

"I'd never ask her to," he said quietly. "Mother, I'm not going to stop writing and working, you know, even if the play is a howling success. There's a book I want to do as soon as I can get down to it, and—Sierra and I have always wanted to open up the ranch again, and spend some of our time there—"

"But what becomes of *me*?" she asked piteously, and began to cry.

"It won't make much difference to you where I am," he replied unemotionally. "You have your friends here, your own circle. I've no intention of uprooting you, or changing your life in any way at all. There's nothing for you to be unhappy about. But there is one thing I do insist upon—and that is that you stop running up unpaid bills. I'll raise your allowance when I can, but I do expect you to keep inside it hereafter."

"James, *please* don't be cross to your poor mother—" she wept, and fluttered a lace handkerchief pathetically.

"I'm sorry if I sounded cross," he said with patience. "I'm very tired. And very worried." He got out his check-book and set to work.

"Worried about the play?"

"No, the play's all right, I suppose. Did you hear any late news on the radio?"

"News? Oh, you mean things in Europe. No, I've stopped listening, it's too depressing. James, darling,

you *will* pay those nasty bills for me, if I promise not to run up any more?"

"Yes—I'll pay them," he sighed, and rose to snap on the radio and stood beside it, waiting.

A commentator's voice, high-pitched with excitement, faded in.

"—German armies smashing across the frontiers of Poland and Nazi bombing planes alleged to be killing Polish women and children mercilessly. Adolf Hitler was described in an official communiqué as having already violated his pledge that he would spare civilians from the horrors of aerial warfare. In one instance, it was alleged, German planes bombed an evacuation train sixty miles west of Warsaw, killing and wounding many women and children. In the last raid on Warsaw—"

"It's come," said James, almost inaudibly. "This is it."

"James, could war make a difference? To the success of the play, I mean."

He turned to look at her slowly, with cold, remote eyes, while the unhuman voice beside him cackled on.

"Does that matter?" he said.

Two days later, on Sunday, September 3rd, England and France declared war on Nazi Germany.

On Monday morning when James appeared tardily for breakfast after a very bad night, his mother was standing by the breakfast table with the mail in her hands. James gave her a dutiful peck along with his Good-morning, and his eyes went at once to the head-

lines of the morning paper which lay beside his plate. He unfolded it.

LINER ATHENIA TORPEDOED BY SUBMARINE. LAST MESSAGE: "SINKING FAST." *1400 Passengers on Board, Mostly Women and Children, 292 Americans.* He felt his way into his chair and went on reading, deaf to the colored maid's Good-morning as she brought him sizzling eggs and bacon, oblivious of the food which slowly cooled on the plate in front of him.

His mother was running through the pile of letters, sorting out those which were addressed to him. She came to a square white envelope with a round scrawl and a Hollywood postmark. She glanced at James, absorbed in the paper. And then she slipped the Hollywood letter quickly in among her own and sat down behind the coffeepot, placing the unopened pile close beside her plate. Her eyes were bright with childish triumph as she began to eat her breakfast.

That was the letter which told him Sierra was going to Reno.

The next fortnight was filled with the exhausting business of rounding off a play and opening it out of town. But when they returned from the week in Baltimore they knew that, barring incredible accidents, they had a hit.

It was only then, with time to draw two consecutive breaths to himself, that James realized it had been a long time since he had heard from Sierra. He had considered and rejected the idea of urging her to come East for the opening. They couldn't meet like that, with his mother and no doubt Lorna Ackland too in

the background, with his time entirely taken up by the most exacting kind of work, and their whole future unsettled and in the balance. If the play was a success, he would have ample opportunity to see it. If it wasn't, he didn't want her to be there.

But on the afternoon of the day they were to open in New York, he suddenly repented his strong-minded decision. Even if the Broadway production failed, he still had enough to offer her now—and the play wasn't going to fail. It was going to be a big night, and Sierra would miss the fun. Well, it was too late now, and he cursed the nerve-shattered trance in which the author of a play in production is likely to exist, to the devastation of his private life, and sat down at the George Washington desk which stood against the window of the living-room overlooking the Park, to write and tell her that he would miss her.

It was a less cagey letter than any he had written since her marriage—in fact, James rather let himself go, for a couple of pages. With a certain satisfaction, he stamped and sealed it, and passed on to other neglected correspondence which he might as well clean up during this unexpected last-minute lull before the opening.

His mother came into the room with her hat on, looking very young and charming, and leaned over him at the desk to peck his cheek in one of her usual gay little gestures of affection—she really thought him pretty splendid by now—and the address of the letter he had finished and laid aside caught her eye.

"I'm just going over to have tea with poor old Mrs.

Edwards," she said virtuously, and added, her fingers itching, "Shall I post your letter for you?"

"Why, yes," he said, somewhat surprised, "if you like. I'll be going out myself pretty soon with some more."

"Well, I'll just drop this one in the box as I go," she said casually, and her quick little hand in its white glove caught up the letter lightly as she turned away. "If you go out, mind you're back in time to dress, won't you, the Barretts and the Coles are coming at seven-thirty for dinner."

"Mm-hm," he answered, writing again.

The door closed behind her.

In a minute or so the telephone rang, and he reached for it, on the corner of the desk. But the cord was thoroughly entangled with the waste-paper basket and he had to get out of his chair to free it—(*Well, I had to think of something in a hurry*, said Asmilius apologetically here)—so that James was standing against the windowcasing with the phone in his hand instead of sitting at the desk, when there was a rasp of brakes in the street two stories below.

James glanced down in time to see his mother, quite unmistakable by reason of the floating white veil on her flower-hat, shake a roguish white-gloved finger at the fuming taxi-driver who had nearly run her down at the corner. James's eyes followed her idly to the safety of the opposite curb, while he listened to Russell at the other end of the wire and said Yes at regular intervals, which was all that was required of him.

And so James saw his mother pause beside the rub-

bish-bin across the street, tear the envelope in her hand twice across and thrust it into the bin, and walk on jauntily, down the street.

He roused at last to Russell's impatient voice in the receiver.

"Jim, I say, can you hear me?—blast, I've been cut off!—Hullo—hullo, *Jim*—"

"Yes," said James stupidly. "I'm still here."

"Well, I'll meet you at the theater, then."

"Meet me—wait a minute, when?"

"*Now*, I said! Just as quick as you can get there!"

"All right. I'll start right away."

He replaced the telephone slowly, stood a moment more staring down the street, and then found his hat and went to the theater.

It was nearly seven-thirty when he returned, and his mother was dressing. By the time he had got himself into a white tie, her theater party was arriving for dinner.

News of the sinking of the *Courageous* had come in during the day—a scant six hundred saved out of over eleven hundred—the first big naval disaster of the war. "Remember Today" opened to a tense, crowded house which at the end was an appreciable number of seconds collecting itself for applause. Only the stage manager could tell how many curtain calls there were then.

At last the congratulations were all said, and the supper party at the St. Regis had run its appointed course, and James re-entered the apartment with his mother.

"What a night!" she sighed with rapturous satisfaction, for with her prettiness and her exquisite

clothes, and her beaming pride in her tall, grave son, she had been quite the belle of the evening. "Darling, I *am* so happy about everything!" And she reached up to pat his face fondly.

He switched on the lights and walked past her into the living-room and laid down his hat.

"Mother, what was it you put in the rubbish-bin across the street?" he inquired over his shoulder.

"Whatever do you mean, dear?"

"This afternoon. I was standing at the window using the phone. I saw you tear something up and put it in the bin. What was it?" He was looking at her now from across the room, his blue eyes very level, a hard little muscle tensing in his cheek.

"Why, I—I don't think I remember," she said in confusion.

"It was my letter to Sierra. Wasn't it?"

"Oh, please, not tonight, James, I'm getting *such* a headache! It's the champagne, I think."

"Why did you do it?" he asked, standing very still, his eyes on her.

"Now, don't let's have a scene, darling, after such a lovely evening!"

"Did you think a futile, cheap little trick like that could ever separate Sierra and me?"

"James, I'm going to bed. We'll go into all that in the morning."

"We'll go into it now," he said. "Come and sit down, mother."

A little awed, a little frightened, for her naughtiness

seldom caught up with her, she slid into the corner of the sofa, pulling her wrap around her.

"You haven't had a chance to stop my letters to her before," he said. "But how about hers to me?" He came and set his hands on the back of the sofa, leaning towards her, and for almost the only time in his life he raised his voice. "How many of her letters have you stolen from me?" he demanded.

"James, you're shouting at me," she whimpered incredulously. "I—I only took one, that's all. There's only been one since—"

"Since I told you I wanted to marry her. I see." He waited, while she wept daintily into her pink chiffon handkerchief. "What did you do with it?"

"Well, I—waited till you had gone and then I put it down there in the grate and touched a match to it."

"Did you read it first?"

"Of course I didn't!" she cried, full of outraged virtue.

"Thank you for that," said James, very angry now, so that his voice was low and controlled and his eyes were blue fire and the bulge of the tense little muscle came and went in his cheek. "Just what did you think you could accomplish by stopping our letters and treating us as though we were childr—" The word dropped away under the impact of revelation. "It's not the first time you've done it! While we were living abroad—when I was at school—you kept back our letters then too!"

"Well, only once in a while, dear, you were both so young, and you seemed to care so *much* for each other,

it wasn't quite—quite *natural*, for children to care so much for each other—”

“And now that we're not children any more,” he said, looking down at her from a great distance, “we're still in love. How do you account for that?”

“But now she's married to another man,” she reminded him primly.

“Thanks to you.”

“Why, James, how can you say such a thing, I had nothing whatever to do with—”

“Yes, it was thanks to you that we always lost touch, that I never had enough money, so that time after time I almost gave up hope—” He found that his hands were shaking absurdly, and his knees, so that he put both elbows on the mantelpiece and hid his face, fighting off the terror of what might have happened, a sick, unreasoning panic which came upon him now that the danger was over. When he raised his head again his face was quiet and composed. “Well, you very nearly had it your way,” he said in an almost conversational tone. “But not quite. That's the funny part. It was all for nothing. Because after what went on in that theater tonight Sierra and I are safe. I never could save what I earned, I never could get ahead, I never could afford to take a chance. There was only one answer for me—Success. And it's happened. By the grace of God it happened tonight—in time!”

“James, you sound exactly like somebody out of your own play!” she cried, staring at him. “You don't think the war will ever— James, you don't think America will ever have to—”

"So I'm a success," he went on heedlessly, standing his full height above her on the hearthrug. "And I've bought it very dearly, day by day of drudgery, year by year of waiting, and doing without even the sight of her. But it's mine at last. And so is Sierra. And neither you nor anybody else is going to stop me now, nor waste another day of my life that I might have with her—before it's too late." He started for the door.

"But, James, darling, where are you *going*?"

He turned on the threshold and looked back at her, very calm, now, very dangerous.

"You know damned well where I'm going," he said. "And I'm going the fastest way—by plane."

It was only a matter of hours later that James paid off his taxi in front of the Acklands' house in Beverly Hills and arrived in the patio, where he found Robert Ackland himself seated in the evening light with a couple of pals, a moth-eaten script, and long cold drinks.

"Well, for—cryin' out loud!" exclaimed Mr. Ackland, too stunned to sound quite cordial. "What are you doing here?"

"Believe it or not, I'm looking for Sierra," said James briefly. "Isn't she here?"

"My dear boy, she's still at Reno!"

"Reno?" queried James, blinking.

"Yes, Lorna's up there with her, though Lorna, I am pleased to say, is *not* taking the cure this time!"

"You mean she—she's gone back to the ranch?"

"I mean she's divorcing Philip at last! Didn't you know? She told me she'd written you! He *asked* for it, by God, and he's going to *get* it!"

"Reno," said James, letting it soak in till it reached, tingling, to his very spine. "The fact is, I've been having a little trouble with my mail—change of address. I didn't know."

"It appears that there's a Mrs. Wilson," Mr. Ackland suggested, and cocked a knowing eye at him.

"Yes," said James. "Yes, there is. Very nice too." His eyes had gone very blue, one brow was up.

"Well, sit down and have a drink on it," said Mr. Ackland, a little recovered.

"Thanks very much," said James, making no move to accept. "I—which of those cars out in the drive is yours?"

"The gray roadster. Why?"

"I want to borrow it."

"Sure, help yourself!"

"Thanks." He turned to go.

"I know it's none of my business," Mr. Ackland yelled after him, "but where are you taking it?"

"To Reno!" James yelled back, without slackening his pace, and a few seconds later the gray roadster roared down the drive.

"He could have made it faster by plane," said one of Mr. Ackland's pals dazedly.

"I doubt it," Mr. Ackland replied with resignation.

* * *

September 20, 1939.—From here on, I was abreast of things myself.

James's silence after the announcement of Philip's request for a divorce became distinctly disconcerting,

even to Lorna, who knows what rehearsals are. It did seem as though he might have said *something*. It didn't take long, did it, to send a telegram. But oh, the difference a telegram can make.

"I expect I wrote the letter wrong again," Sierra would say miserably. "Like that time about the fraternity pin. I expect it sounded as though I expected him to—well, to—after all, a man can't really ask a woman to marry him before she's got her divorce, can he."

Lorna said she had heard of such a thing.

With Lorna dictating, they wrote out a rather formal first-night wire and sent it off jointly, to the theater. (James, by the way, never got round to opening his telegrams that night.)

The day after the opening was rather flat, while they waited for news. None came.

"Maybe it's the l-leading-lady," said Sierra bravely.

"Not much, it isn't!" Lorna replied with conviction. "James Montgomery may be absent-minded, or thick-headed, or over-worked, or plain cock-eyed, but you can't call him fickle!"

The following day was enlivened by the delivery of the pinto horse which was to fill David's sacred place. Sierra, clad in blue jeans and shirt and a beaver hat, went down to the corral to inspect him, and found Pop (only a little more grizzled than in David's day) and Joe (definitely balder) putting a saddle on the newcomer, whose name was Stormy.

"Hullo, there," said Sierra, and stroked the pink velvet nose. "Joe, he's wonderful!"

"Yessir, he's the spittin' image of that no-'count David hoss you used to think so much of," said Pop, pulling up the girth with a grunt. "Stand the pair of 'em up side by side and you couldn't hardly tell 'em apart! Blows hisself up the same way, too, when you come to pull a cinch on him!"

"Say Howdy," said Sierra, stooping.

"He won't stand for no nonsense like that," Pop warned her.

Sierra slapped Stormy's off fore smartly.

"Shake hands!" she insisted. "David's leg was white all the way down to the fetlock. Come on, Stormy, you may as well learn—*up!*"

The off fore was lifted, in a bewildered sort of way.

"Would ya look at that, now!" said Pop in disgust. "He's fell for it a'ready!"

Sierra laughed, and swung herself into the saddle.

"He knows who's boss!" she said.

At that moment a dusty gray roadster arrived at the gate as though it had been shot out of a gun, turned in with a screech of brakes and drew up with a jerk at the side door, where two new bathtubs stood nakedly in the yard awaiting installation. There was no mistaking the tall, long-legged figure which stepped rather stiffly out of the car, moving with a kind of awkward grace, as though it had never been in a hurry in its life.

"Glory be!" said Pop in awed delight. "If it ain't the Prince of Wales again!"

Stormy walked towards the car slowly, with Sierra in the saddle. James took a step forward, and then four or five more, and laid his hand on the bridle, so that

Stormy nosed his shoulder inquiringly. James stood looking up at her a moment, and then he took off his hat.

"How do you do?" he said politely, and Sierra slid without a sound from the saddle into his waiting arms.

And so they lived happily forever after, said Asmilus sentimentally. *Well, perhaps not forever. But very happily.*

REMEMBER TODAY

"Remember Today," wrote James in his play, "for it may be the last we can bear to look back on for a long time to come. Catch and hold each present hour, learn it, try to comprehend it, overlook nothing of its beauty. Remember today, for tomorrow it may be too late ever to fashion another day like it. Remember today while there are still hands to hold and lips to kiss, while we are still young and free . . ."

James and Sierra spent a good part of their lifetimes remembering, until finally their memories of the past could be replaced by their sharing of the present.

Remember Today is a gay story, but it is also a perceptive and significant novel about delightful people who can still capture, however precariously, laughter and love and a happy ending.

"... a refreshing and amusing love story. It is modern without being hard and sentimental without being soft. Its lovers are engaging characters, a cut away from the standard patterns." — THE NEW YORK TIMES

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